

Journey to the Land of No Return: Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette* and the Sumerian "Descent of Inanna"

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Abstract

The shaman's song is reflected in epical literature in the theme of the Otherworldly Journey. As recorded by ethnologists, the shaman's song, a record of as well as engagement with such a journey, summons up a bizarre dreamscape populated by fantastic beings, and engages with a specialized poetics employing linguistic paradox, trance-inducing rhythms, and nonsense words—these last considered by shamans to be a "secret language." Alice Notley's contemporary descent myth *The Descent of Alette* has strong ties to the ancient Sumerian Descent of Inanna as well as to the Gnostic myth of Sophia's descent into matter to affect the redemption of humankind. I show Inanna's connection to shamanic praxis and Gnostic mythology, and read Alette's journey as a crisis vision, in order to argue for the existence of a shamanic poetics, a special way of using language as a healing medium and vehicle of myth. Notley's post-modern epic placed alongside the extremely ancient Inanna myth-cycle reveals the shaman's perennial theme of the Otherworldly Journey ever reconfigured according to the artist/healer's relationship to a specific culture, and that culture's relationship to the shamanic paradigm.

Keywords

Contemporary Poetry and Poetics, Ancient Epic Poetry, American Literature, Sumerian Myth, Gnosticism

1. Introduction

Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette* is a post-modern myth recalling both the shamanic crisis journey and ancient myths of underworld descent particularly found in the Sumerian Inanna cycle. The Inanna Descent is of

special interest since it predates Gilgamesh. That is, the Gilgamesh epic is, in a sense, a retelling of various portions of Inanna's tale, reinterpreting the old female-based myths in ways to enforce male hegemony. The underworld was, paradoxically, a very real battleground in the mythologies of Sumer, Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome, each of which had its own official, as it was, map of Hell, and its own version of the myth of the descent. The Greek and Roman descent myths, however, products of a patriarchal culture that have recently subsumed its matriarchal mother, come to us in a form that problematizes shamanic activity. Although the Greeks held to the idea of oracular inspiration, shamanic activity is still confined to the temple of the goddess or the sybil's grotto. Lay participants at Eleusis were well cautioned to keep the mysteries of Persephone and Demeter to themselves. There were severe penalties for shamans who dared strike out on their own. Orpheus' fame is too much for him; he's torn apart by the maenads in a tragedy that seems to prefigure James Dean and rock'n'roll. The myth of the shamanic quest or underworld descent is turned into a legitimization of the Roman Empire in Virgil's *Aeneid*, when Aeneas descends into the underworld to hear from his father Anchises the grand destiny of conquest awaiting their progeny. Dante follows in Aeneas' footsteps in presenting the shamanic journey as a sort of exposition of the wondrous bureaucracy of God.

2. Discussion

If we might say that the tendency from Gilgamesh on has been to interpret the old female-based myths in ways to enforce male hegemony, then we might also say that Notley's poem runs counter to Greek, Roman and Christian versions of the myth of the underworld descent as she presses further back in time to the matriarchal, the tribal, the shamanic. Alette's progress "ever downward" (Notley, 1992: p. 42) through subway tunnels, subterranean caverns and dark woods, is toward the source of her being, her primal origin, with which she must connect in order to fulfill her larger mission of killing the Tyrant. Is Notley's "First Woman" Inanna, the great Goddess of Love and Compassion, decapitated by the ages? Is this the same primal goddess—"our mother"—to whom Alette makes her journey in the Dark Wood and from whom she gains the powers that will help her to overcome the Tyrant? The two descent myths can easily be understood in reference to the shamanic Otherworldly Voyage.

Inanna's close connection with shamanic praxis cannot be doubted. In a Mesopotamian cylinder seal dating to the Akkad period, c. 2334-2154 B.C.E., the Holy Priestess of Heaven appears wearing the horned head dress of the traditional shaman, subduing a lion, possibly an animal helper spirit, and sporting a gigantic pair of wings (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983: p. 92). As we have seen, the shaman's soul journey is quite often imaged as a flight. Inanna also tends the sacred Huluppu tree, which, like the shamanic tree, acts as an axis between sacred and mundane realms. She is also closely associated with hermaphroditism, bisexuality and ritual sex, just like the tribal shaman. Moreover, as the Epic of Gilgamesh makes clear, votaries of Inanna are presumed to have the shaman's oneiromantic, visionary and curative powers (Cline, 2010).

It is significant as well that the goddess wins her ability to descend into and ascend out of the underworld in a drinking contest with Enki, the God of Wisdom. She is proved mistress of shamanic intoxication by her successful navigation of the shaman's liminal space, and through her trickery of Enki, himself credited with having sailed to the underworld in a magic boat, much like the Icelandic hero Vainamöinen. Inanna extracts from Enki her powers and attributes—called by the Sumerians *me*—which she manages to spirit away before the God of the Waters can recover his sobriety. Included among her *me* are the traditional shamanic powers of fire making, singing, magic and also the power of deceit. As we have seen, deception—legerdemain—is essential to the shaman, who articulates the liminal space between concrete reality and the imaginal realm through a confoundment of the senses.

Inanna's descent into the underworld parallels shamanic crisis narratives in presenting a symbolic dismemberment of the goddess. In a confrontation with Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld, she is:

...turned into a corpse,

A piece of rotting meat,

And was hung from a hook on the wall (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983: p. 60).

Such otherworldly mortification is quite characteristic of shamanic crisis journeys. Among the Avam Samoyed of northern Asia, for instance, before the shaman can gain the curative knowledge and powers he is seeking in the underworld he must be "ritually slain and boiled over the fire in a cauldron for three years" (Drury, 1982: p. 26). In this way the shaman, as it was, sloughs off his old skin to be reborn in a new, magical,

body.

Like Inanna, Notley's Alette experiences the shaman's ritual dismemberment, in this case at the hands of her animal helper spirit, an owl.

"Talons tore me," "tore my flesh" "as I was dragged" "into the darkness" "The pain was fire in" "spreading pools," "quick-opening flowers," "fiery blossoms" "with torn" "pecked centers" "Till all I was was fire" "Fire &" "my screaming" (Notley, 1992: p. 107).

After dying, Alette is reborn with the magical powers that will enable her to defeat the Tyrant—the power to see in the dark, to change into an animal, and to fly.

Alette's descent into Hell is shamanic in that it is a voyage of redemption, of healing. Like the shaman she must pass through a series of bizarre mindscapes, dreamlike encounters with eyeballs rolling around on the floor of the subway train or glistening walls of flesh. Like the shaman, Alette journeys through a place of sickness and despair in order to communicate with her ancestor, First Woman, thereby to attain healing information. Her confrontation with this great mother of all—now decapitated—is what empowers Alette to complete her mission. The voice of the goddess—"a headless voice"¹—spins bright pure colored lights that caress Alette and promise the successful outcome of her venture.

Through her journey, it is as if Alette is passing through the liminal regions described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. According to Buddhist tradition the voyager between worlds must remain aware that what s/he is seeing and experiencing is an illusion—must not be attached to such egoistic constructs as sorrow or even happiness. The deceased consciousness can, by making the right choices, navigate the liminal realm and attain a successful reincarnation. Just as shamans tap into the wisdom of spiritual entities residing in the Otherworld, Alette is spurred ever onward by a voice that tells her "to keep walking," like the voice of the Tibetan priest, instructing the deceased soul to penetrate the illusion with which it is confronted. "O child of noble family, do not let your thoughts wander" (Fremanantle & Trungpa, 2000: p. 84). But if the lingering consciousness of the deceased allows itself to get too caught up in the vertigo and terror s/he feels from confronting fantastic landscapes and horrifying demons, it may become trapped in a lower level of consciousness or in one of the hell realms. In Burroughs's guidebook of the cities of the dead *The Western Lands*, he writes:

To transcend life one must transcend the conditions of life, the shit and farts and piss and sweat and snot of life. A frozen disgust is as fatal as a prurient fixation, two sides of the same counterfeit coin. It is necessary to achieve a gentle and precise detachment (Burroughs, 1987: p. 155).

With just such a "gentle and precise detachment," Alette must see and then see through each manifestation of Hell that presents itself. In one cavern she sees

"...a battleground"
"of corpses," "sometimes" "single-layered," "sometime piled up" "in
"pyramids" (Notley, 1992: p. 51).

The eyes of the corpses are exuding a semen-like discharge that gathers in disgusting pools. When she looks down and sees some of this noxious white substance oozing from her palm, Alette wisely distinguishes herself from the appalling horror that confronts her. She allows herself to see, really see, this disgusting panorama, but keeps her presence of mind enough not to be swallowed up by it, not to become part of it. After she confronts the evil with her declaration, the burbling ooze turns quiet and dissipates. Alette can now go to the next room, the next dream, the next level, and thus proceed with her mission to kill the Tyrant.

The theme of seeing is an integral part of Notley's treatment of the Underworld Descent. Eyes are described throughout her journey. She looks into the eyes of each person she meets. The eyes may be pale-gray, raisin-dark or glowing red. She mentions owls' eyes, corpses' eyes. This seeing is a seeing into seeing itself, a knowing, understanding of an intimate kind. Alette remarks:

"As I stared down" "into the black lake" "I saw more & more"
"pairs of eyes"
...
"As if the smallest" "constituents" "of matter were" "somehow eyes" (106).

¹Quoting within quotation marks Notley's carefully nuanced quotations within quotations within quotations produces results that are probably distant from the poet's original intent and are certainly quite baffling to the eye. In quoting Notley's poem within quotation marks of my own I shall content myself with quoting only the words that appear in Notley's original and neither scare nor quotation marks.

Notley's fascination with eyes was also shared by the ancient Sumerians who employed eye-shaped amulets and pendants in religious contexts, and concocted thousands of "eye idols", schematized humanoid figures fashioned from alabaster, limestone, and black burnished clay (Black & Green, 1992: p. 79-80) each with the gigantic, bulging eyes commonly associated in our own time with extraterrestrial beings. Eyes, moreover, are closely associated with the goddess Inanna. In a Mesopotamian cylinder seal from circa 3000 B.C., above the arch of a temple are two eight petalled rosettes, "the flower or star symbol of...Inanna" (Wolkstein, 1993: p. 184). Above the archway of the city wall is a face in the sky with two enormous oval eyes, the eyes of Inanna. Wolkstein notes that: "Similar enormous oval eyes in association with rosettes appear on a vessel excavated at Uruk in the sacred precinct of Inanna" (Wolkstein, 1993: p. 184).

The obvious resemblance between the eye and the vulva may be one reason for this symbolism. This is, after all, this is the Goddess of Love who exclaims, in response to her lover Dumuzi's overtures: "...plow my vulva, man of my heart!/ Plow my vulva!" (37). But another reason must be that Inanna, as the Goddess of Compassion, sees, in the sense of understands, the sufferings of her petitioners. For Inanna, seeing is knowing, experiencing. In fact it is her descent into Hell and what she sees there that teaches this Goddess of Love compassion, and which spurs compassion in all of her earthly friends and servants when her corpse is liberated from Hell and reconstituted. All of them, that is, with the exception of Tammuz, who is too caught up in the power and glory of his kingly position. He doesn't see her and for this is taken down into Hell in Inanna's place. Seeing, in the Inanna myth is equivalent with gnosis, knowing. It is the complex-eyed fly, observer of funeral bier and bar room, who guides the Goddess of Love back to her estranged lover.

As have the works we have been examining, *The Descent of Alette* interweaves shamanic themes with fierce Gnostic speculation. Notley's Tyrant is roughly equivalent with the Gnostic Demiurge, that tin-horn God of whom Burroughs observed, "He needs us more than we need him." (Burroughs, 1987: p. 53). Alette's journey is a relentless movement toward awareness of deeper and deeper layers of the self and also outward toward greater awareness of the world. Her final slaying of the Tyrant liberates the lost creatures from the crowded subway station of their days, from the drudgery of endless repetition of meaningless actions which is the Gnostic hell of pure time. Notley employs a Gnostic critique of time similar to that of Valle-Inclan when Alette enters a cavern in which she is divided into three parts, her past, present and future. But, as she realizes, "Time's secret name—is Oneness" (Notley, 1992: p. 60). One is already dead if one has been severed from the essential unity of one's being. Time is a construct of consciousness that Alette must see through in order to reconnect with the Goddess. And realization of its essential nature will help her as well in her battle with the Tyrant for which she must integrate her past, present and future selves; she must step outside of time, relying on primeval instincts and an unshaking vision of the future, to see through the illusion of continuity that the Tyrant has woven, his spell of control which asserts that nothing can kill him. But he can be killed, precisely because he is, finally, not a person but a construct.

Another striking appropriation of Gnostic material can be seen in Notley's handling, if you will, of snakes. Snakes, because they slough off their skin, have long been associated with rebirth (Wolkstein, 1993: p. 142). Archaeological evidence shows that snake-worship was part of the cult of the Great Mother Goddess. In statuettes, the bare-breasted Cretan Earth Goddess holds a writhing snake in each hand. Perhaps the association of snakes to the Earth Goddess is due to their being so low to the ground, the way they seem to come out of the earth. In Notley's epic, snakes are perceived as helpful, especially to the women. A woman who has sworn never to leave the subway tunnels unless they all leave tells of a dream she had in which, in the guise of a snake, she struck at the tyrant. Later on, in a cave, Alette encounters a snake, and asks if it is, "a clue to"

"the woman" "I'm looking for?" "A lost" "first mother," "an Eve unlike Eve," "or anyone" "whose name we know" "A depiction" "of me," the snake said, "will help you find her," "when the time comes" "Oracularly speaking" "my symbol will mark her place" (Notley, 1992: p. 76).

The symbol of the snake also figures prominently in Gnosticism. In the *Philosophumena* an account of the Naassene sect begins with these words:

The priests and leaders of this doctrine were those who were first called Naassenes, from the Hebrew word *naas*, which means "Serpent." Later on, they themselves assumed the name of "Gnostics," claiming to be unique in their knowledge of the deepest things (Doresse, 1960: p. 47-48).

The Paratae, Gnostic authors of the original *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, conceived of a gigantic

snake in the sky, the spiralling of creation. According to the *Philosophumena*:

“Anyone,” say the Paratae, “whose eyes are so favored, will see, on looking up into the sky, the beautiful form of the Serpent coiled up at the grand beginning of the heavens and becoming, for all born beings, the principle of all movement.” Then he will understand that no being, either in heaven or on earth, was formed without the Serpent.... (51).

Likewise, in Alette’s journey, the same voice that cautions her to “Keep walking,” observes:

...“Time for you” “proceeds step-by-step,” “yet there is”
“something snakelike” “in your journey’s” “movement” (Notley, 1992: p. 69).

Alette’s assassination of the Tyrant has echoes of Pistis-Sophia’s condemnation of the Demiurge in Gnostic scripture. Angered by the pretender god’s assertion that he is lord and creator of all, Sophia calls him a “blind god” (Robinson, 1990: p. 175), and gives a portion of her light to Yaldabaoth’s son Sabaoth, later to become that rebel deity Jesus Christ who will carry in his message the *gnosis* that will be fatal to the false god. Sophia, as goddess of love, of tantric union, and savior of humanity might well be thought of as a Gnostic version of the goddess Inanna. Inanna’s descent into the underworld is echoed by Sophia’s willing descent into the world of matter in order to liberate humanity from the tyrant Time’s yoke.

3. Conclusion

My point is not that Notley has studied Gnosticism—which she probably has—but to suggest that the ideas and images of the experimental poetics that I have been articulating draw from the same experiential base as the Gnostic writers, and that the two share a base of understanding with shamanic observation. The shamanic, the gnostic, and the experimental all shed light on one another. The motifs that they share are not borrowed from one another as much as they are in each case based on a human experience that is original and unique. Schematizations of the experience of the shaman-poet’s underworld journey may be helpful, but no map can do more than indicate the direction. Each poet’s version of the underworld journey is different. They are not to be taken as symbols but as possibilities of experience.

Implicit in the liminal poetics I have been sketching, and which is fully embodied by both Inanna and Alette, is the notion of compassion. The writer-voyager is the healer. The purpose of writing is to liberate all creatures from suffering. Alette can kill the Tyrant because she realizes that, finally, he is only a construct. The illusion, as it was, of an illusion. So it is that we have to face down and destroy the tyrants which we have constructed but which try to construct us, to keep us trapped below floors by imposing upon us the linearity of time and the sacred creed of one truth.

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