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Poetry

Reason and Other Women
Alice Notley
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A book that uses subject material like Byzantine art and the writings of Christine de Pizan to launch an investigation into the way the mind works, and to get at the heart of thought before it can be analyzed would seem like a foolish, if not impossible, endeavor—unless the project were a book of poetry by Alice Notley. *Reason and Other Women* is accomplished poet Notley's latest volume, and it stomps all over the notion that volumes of poetry must be thin and compact. Her book's size matches her ambition; it's reminiscent of the *Iovis* books by poet Anne Waldman, published in the mid-1990s by Coffee House Press.

Not only is the size of the book larger than the average poetry volume, the pages are brimming over with words. Extremely long enjambed lines can fool the reader into thinking that one is reading wordy prose poems, but this is verse, from the mind of a poet at the zenith of her powers. Where another poet might let such extreme verbosity carry her away on whim after whim, Notley has her eye on her target.

Such a lofty goal—to get at the heart of thought before it can be analyzed—might sound dry and academic, but that's certainly not the case here. By the end of the first few poems, the reader has encountered a snake that's constantly shedding its skin, entered a basilica, and been privy to the poet's inner thoughts while receiving a message from a woman in a Byzantine mosaic: "I am communicating / with you now without a voice, unless I'm reading, reading aloud but even if I'm doing / that I'm telepathizing too, because you know what I mean despite the flatness of the / voice and of words, the incredible flatness of words which we all must deal with and / telepathize around." This is heady, exciting, shiver-down-the-back writing.

Notley's poetic style takes some getting used to. Because she's trying to portray a sense of catching thoughts as they're formed, the lines often seem breathless. Apostrophes have been entirely stricken, as if to imply that it's more important to get the sense of the word on the page than it is to worry about correct punctuation. It's entirely worth the effort; this book, from

beginning to end, does what poetry should do: keep the reader's mind at the edge of human understanding. Notley has created a dense, challenging volume of poetry that is as exciting as any literary thriller.

Dan Coffey