

The Iovis Trilogy
By Anne Waldman
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When “the poet positions herself in the cosmos”(7), it’s going to be big. Anne Waldman’s one thousand and thirteen page epic trilogy – with each of the three books published consecutively in 1993, 1997, and 2012 – sutures itself to our familiarly troubled world with an expansive mind and heart: “suffering suffering / what is it like / graphomania”(847). Situated as a “narration of a time [...], a way of being in the world”(xi), it draws on and expands the Modernist American epic tradition of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky and Charles Olson. Waldman inserts herself in it “to see how the woman poet-mind would fare and flow”(xi), thus challenging generic boundaries and broaching the question of “*what is ‘appropriate’ stuff for epic attention*”(529). The answer is, for the most part, everything that is the stuff of Waldman’s attention. *Iovis* is a radically open text, written by “an open system (woman) available to any words or sounds [she’s] informed by”(1) and it is a part of the cloth of her daily experience and thoughts and readings and spiritual practice and travels.

Iovis is not without shape or purpose, however. It takes history as an unavoidable invocation “to take on the manifestations of patriarchy in writing, tracking, tracing, documenting”(xi). It is driven by an ethic to publically act – to write, teach, investigate, enable, organize, demonstrate, document, and perform, often ceremoniously – to act as a counterforce in an age guided by war and seemingly bent on destruction. Virgil’s phrase – “*Iovis omnia plena*,” meaning “all is full of Jove”(2), all is “full of,” ruled by, the laws and social order laid down by the male god’s principle – becomes the initiating emblem for patriarchy in *Iovis*, at once a personal epistle and a highly-staged response to our time of military imperialism and its collateral damage. Aided by “investigative travel”(xi), this project spans much of the globe. Wrought through multiple formal propositions – chants, dream narratives, reportage, letters, lists, and rants – it attacks from myriad angles, “add[ing] other voices that inform and infuse a life”(xii), and thus rejecting unilateral male energies and an American-centric vision.

The book’s frontis plate image provides a snapshot of the world Waldman was born into: she is a baby-in-bunting on the knee of a uniformed soldier, her father; it is 1945. This image is echoed in references to her own family history (relatives’ letters are consulted, their memories plumbed) and to her son, Ambrose Eyre Bye, to whom the trilogy is dedicated. Throughout the epic, as he grows from a small child into a young man, he serves as Waldman’s male-companion-spirit in writing. The adult male story is of war, and the boy-child’s is of the

hope of reparation, and she is *between* these stories, literally: “if she includes him he understands the world better, simple as that”(240).

As a conscientious citizen, “Anne-Who-Grasps-The-Broom-Tightly”(15) attempts to be fully aware of innumerable social inequities and injuries. As a Buddhist, she compassionately responds. Waldman manages the huge breadth of this text by pegging it down with a prose preface for each individually-titled section (each book contains about 25 sections) that notes events personal, national, and global to create a sense of the lived space-time of the poem. In the sections that follow, the page is energetically inhabited anew through an array of textual strategies: prose in various forms, poetry stanzaic and idiosyncratically spaced, the whole range of typographic marks on your keyboard deployed in signification, hand-drawn images, photographs, and collages, are but a few. Even within one section, the words are rendered through a shifting subjectivity: sometimes I, sometimes she, sometimes another; sometimes female, sometimes male, sometimes androgynous; sometimes pedestrian, sometimes psychotropic, sometimes theatrical, sometimes scholarly, sometimes imaginary, sometimes prophetic, sometimes not-quite-nameable. The poet’s life and its antecedents bump up against, break up, and slide over one another like tectonic plates. Here is a hot, living poem.

The overall effect of *Iovis* is to make visible the previously covered-over or unimagined female heroics of deep inquiry, replete with all the critical and responsive mechanisms that could possibly entail. Waldman delves into cultural materials and experiences and *Iovis* delivers up multiple myths and daily lives, so that, for instance, we learn in detail aspects of Hindu texts and temple rituals in one section, while another explains Beat Generation gender dynamics (in the form of a letter to Jane Dancy), while another reports on acts of domestic terrorism, provides a ballistics lesson, and “call[s] upon the President of the United States to reassess the easy availability of guns”(365). As a counterforce, *Iovis* is, grandly, a millennial poetics, a guide to being a poet of this world now, offering lessons in mastering “weapons like articulate speech & poetry, beauty”(154).

Reading *Iovis* requires an act of faith. You have to trust not only Waldman but your experience of your own moments of dark and light, or uncertainty and clarity, that the poem recalls or opens up in you. For those thinking about reading *Iovis*, I have two suggestions: read it *slowly*, devoting a portion of your life to it (a year would be sufficient, but at least 3 months should be allotted), spending each day with one section. Or read it with a group of people, such as the one that took place on November 15, 2012 at the Poet’s House in New York City, hosted by Belladonna (<http://www.belladonnaseries.org>). This journey is not something to undertake alone. At the heart of the epic, Waldman reminds us, “Community is ‘voice’”(2). *Iovis* is *meant* to be read aloud: “for it was her song, & / she always wanted to sing it / moving

as she did among his waves”(213). With its energies animated on the breath of its readers, *Iovis* is realized as a cultural document, and it achieves its goal of “leav[ing] a trace so that poets of the future know we were not just slaughtering one another”(656).