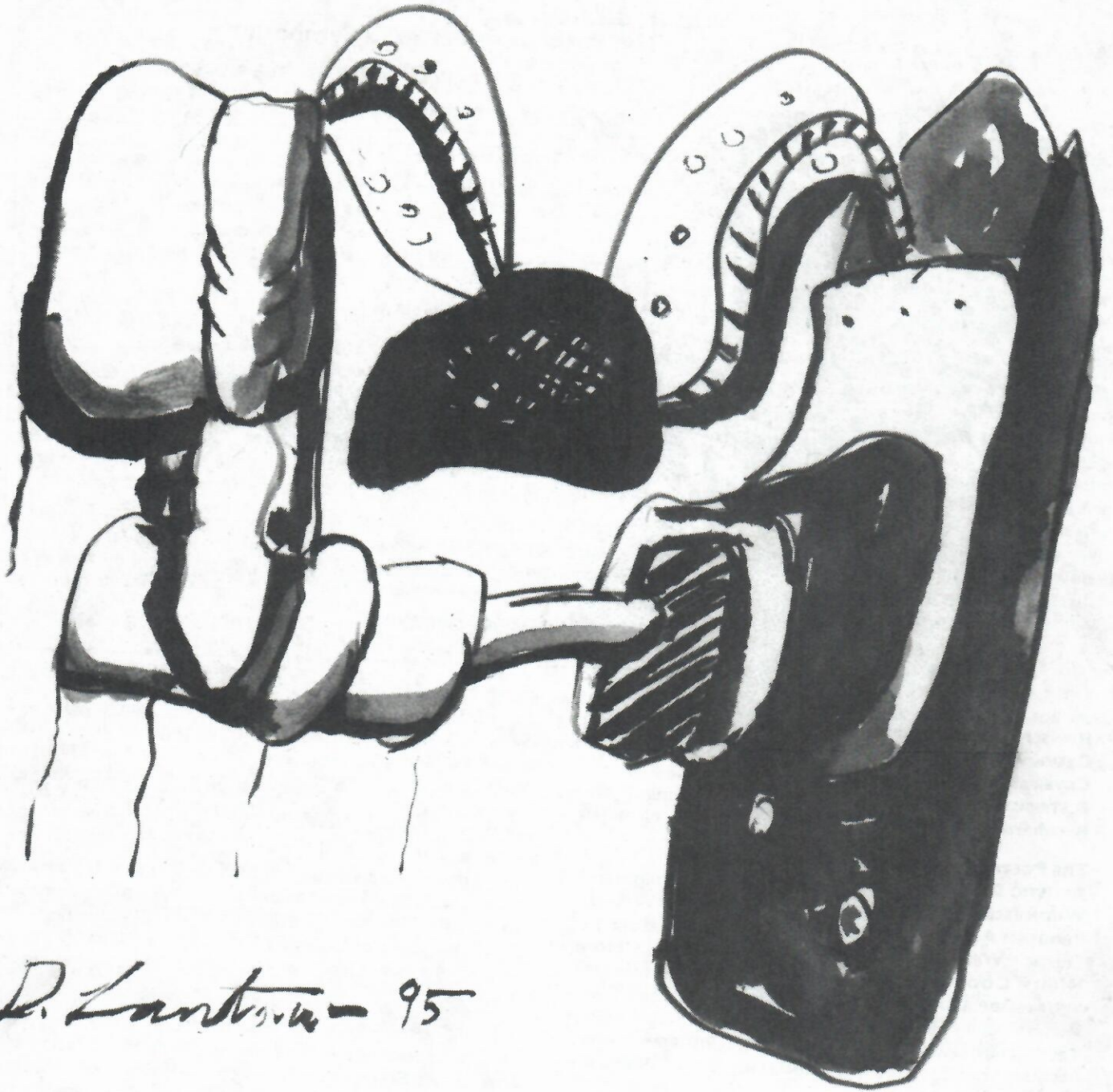


# the poetry project newsletter

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*D. Lantieri - 95*



WHAT'S INSIDE: Studying Hunger: Poetry & Cannibalism • Allen Ginsberg & Kenneth Koch Conversation • Carl Watson Goes Where the Bottos Go • Reviews of Ed Sanders, Patricia Spears Jones, Alice Notley, Gerritt Lansing, Stacy Doris, Jack Kerouac & others.

Oct/Nov 1996

Kerouac declares the "Pure masculine urge to freely sing." But you also get Kerouac at his most open and his most swinging — his gift to run the changes on American English that few possess. In his moving and informative introduction to **Book of Blues**, Robert Creeley notes:

These poems provide an intensely vivid witness of both writer and time....What holds it finally all together are words, one after another, as he plays, moves, with their sound, follows their lead, shifting from English to Franco-American joute, nonsense to sense, reflection to immediate sight and intimate record.....He was in that old way "serious". He really believed in words.

It's really in the sound. Which makes Rhino's collected recordings of Kerouac a crucial text and not an adjunct to the printed words. And **Book of Blues**, the best collection of Kerouac's poetry to be issued, calls for a reassessment of his poetry — itself long thought to be a very minor adjunct to the novels. Although there were writers who were working in the same regions of Kerouac's prose (examples being Hubert Selby and the forgotten Chandler Brossard), there were no poets doing what Kerouac was after in his period. In the years from 1953 to 1958 when these works were written, experimental writers such as Charles Olson, Paul Blackburn, Phillip Whalen and Robert Creeley were still working through the legacies of masters Pound and Williams. This work still challenges contemporary poets in its' casual shrugging off the chains of the ancients and the whole notion of "THE TRADITION." It imagines literature without academies, poets without creative writing degrees and, in Charles Olson's phrase, a nation of nothing but poetry.

—Joel Lewis

**Two books by Alice Notley. Closer to me & Closer . . . The Language of Heaven and Désamère**, O Books (Oakland, 1995); 140 pages, \$10.50.

*we know no rule  
of procedure,*

*we are voyagers, discoverers  
of the not-known,*

*the unrecorded;  
we have no map;*

*possibly we will reach haven,  
heaven* H.D., *Trilogy*

*I remember feeling very happy writing it,  
waking up mornings with my dead father's  
voice in my head, Alice Notley writes in  
the preface to Close to me & Closer . . .*

(The Language of Heaven). *One never forgets a parent's voice and he just took over.* In a fictional dialogue with her dead father, she searches for new knowledge, a new birth, a new measure, a common mystical ground. Notley divides one voice into two and then into even smaller speech genres, the measure of her father's ordinary Southwestern speech and her own lyrical lines. As the father stumbles into speech, the daughter begins mute.

*I sit mute Nothing mutely  
—Flowerlike—  
I sit being nothing of petals  
be nothing And then of petals  
This new is new shape Any new thing  
is a flower A mute flower  
flowing color are you*

The father speaks of the problems for those living in the present, the fragmentation, the clutter of things between us, the dependence on time as a limit, as a schedule, the dividing of life into parts, the way our living bodies are "bagged", still in birthing sacks, identity as prison and armor. The daughter examines the contradictions, the impossibility of being a heroine, an "I" and yet out of absence and loss, she continually comes back to singularity, "me" with another, loved. She responds to her father's stumbling ellipsis and emphasis with poetry, encantations, enjambed lines, free of punctuation, beginnings and endings collapsing into one another. At one point within her search, she chants a radical manifesto—

*Change your Breath  
Change your heart beat  
But  
above all Change your mind  
Change the  
paths of The planets  
But above all  
Change your think-  
ing  
\*\*\*\*\*  
Break all the un-  
written laws  
Destroy  
the song (15-16)*

To follow directly without hesitation, a single path or formula, can result in destroying that which might be loved most. The grief: one might be unable to stop the destruction. The joy, but grief: one can still sing.

*Oh am I born again as a soloist in a  
maddened heartless music Father  
show me My new birth A new birth (20)*

Her father offers help for the living. *Leave that supermarket . . . don't buy something, talk plain to yourself. Or Dream*

(36) *Sorrow . . . pushes you . . . towards god—doesn't it?* (38) Listen to the dead, find a new thing, another way to think that honors fluidness and between-ness; to think with the knowledge of the dead, disturb oppositions, rip open the bag a bit, and undo like the flower petals falling from the poem, word by word, or the father's arms unwrapping her, or a dream unfolding. His ellipsis and emphasis becomes hers. Her lyrical line becomes his. Mute, "gap, they stumble together, an alchemy—

*There are not two here, never were  
And yet  
company . . .  
Have filled me with . . .  
All of one  
med-i-um (64)*

Poetry here is the speech of heaven, intimacy, darkness. And yet to die is to finally lose words. The father considers questions of origination and definition—poetry, god, sorrow, beauty, reality, time, creation. One question opens into another; with nothing solid, no definitive answer—all is the pearl. The voices of parent and child separate, midway are joined together into one, separate again into "he" and "she," and then the borders collapse. And that's about knowing, her father says. To stumble is to rip the bag. *When I died . . . I . . . god . . . came into me . . . like clouds.* Heaven is a way of talking and thinking. Stumble talk. Magic. This is heavenly poetry. Where the borders of time and space are disturbed, perhaps irrelevant. He speaks: *I . . . can't get it into . . . time . . .* (60). She speaks: *This is what it's like to be dead/The words at hand, writing themselves (62).* A voice is heard *Be still child* — Accept a gift, a new number, a tangled form, chaos, the creation over and over again, ness, being—

*There is no Made Thing  
in the cosmos—It is all Gift  
If gift were not to imply  
a giver . . . God is  
gift not giver  
As well as you Are that*

The advice from the dead: *Don't try to follow the line of /Approach it whole.* The final beautiful poem in this sequence is a celebration of new knowledge—

*The measure of stumbling & entangle-  
ment  
is wholeness,  
is one man, or one stone, one  
soul.*

This new measure, entanglement & stumbling, occurs as loving, as a "die of love." (65) This is a wise and hopeful

book in which Alice Notley succeeds in stealing character and story away from the novel and giving it back to poetry in a radically different way. *You try to be . . . in a flash in someone's mind or heart . . . & that, that's heaven* says the father (21) This book "in a flash" was in my mind and heart. And that's heaven.

And then I stumble into Désamère—

*'I have such a sadness,' Amere says  
'As when a husband dies, magnified  
Till it replaces all that we were  
There may never be nothing more  
But this feeling, and then nothing' (80)*

In the second book, Notley breaks this sadness apart into a polyphony of apparent voices, historical and personal, remembering and reinterpreting the losses and disillusionment after WWII, Vietnam and the 80's. Her quest is to bring the playfulness and hope of Robert Desnos' surreal poetry back into her character, Amere's poetry, to affirm the mystical, magical, chance, revelation; to birth poetry again as evocative, to come out of the desert of rationality —

*Do you know the singing of voices in the mountains*

*The resounding noise of trumpets and horns?*

*Why are we only singing the refrains of imprisonment*

*To the endless sound of a sad alarm?*

*Robert Desnos Night of Loveless Nights\**

In the final section, Amère, the woman poet, writes a series of surreal desert poems in which the voices of bitterness & hope, Amère & Desnos are intertwined. Even though in Desamère, the horror of loss seems more concretized in image and story, personal and social history, there is still hope, haven, and possibly one is even closer to heaven—

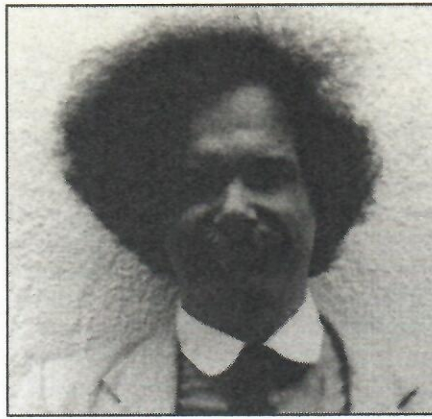
Both **Closer to me . . . and Désamère** are tender and thought provoking poetic sequences that have penetrated my dream life, setting me adrift on a new voyage into death, dream, exile, hope. Thank you, Alice Notley.

— Barbara Henning

\*Lewis Warsh, trans. New York: The Ant's Forefoot, 1973.

**CHEKHOV** by Edward Sanders, Black Sparrow Press (Santa Rosa, 1995); 240 pages, \$13.50.

A biography in poems...when was the last time you read a biography in verse? Verse plays...yes, and ballads...though ballads are rarely longer than a big newspaper obituary. A biography in verse sounds like a 19th century vanity, a quaint form long abandoned. This book is not that.



The tradition here is the folk ballad: easy to remember, easy to memorize, a workhorse to carry facts. The ballad is musical, by definition, with its mnemonic rhythm and rhyme—and facts by that form's nature are made approachable and clear. Ballad brings us a world of white hats and black hats, where the label works as well as—better than—"local habitation". In a ballad, the facts might once have been complex: why, for example, had Lord Randall's lover come to hate him so? Was the world actually well rid of Billie Jo McAllister? But in a ballad that's not what matters. We can never forget their deaths. White hats become us.

**Chekhov** is not a verse play. It's a chronologically arranged sequence of short poems grouped in 61 sections. It is rare to find more than five lines unbroken by a section space, a breath, an asterisk. These poems are chants, choruses, narrations, and all of them imply a tune, as good lyrics usually do. Ed Sanders calls this book "a poem on Chekhov" and writes that he plans to do a musical drama from the material. The folk-ballad form is an alternative for history, and serves as a means to package a story against the danger of oblivion.

The story carried in these serviceable stanzas are facts about the life of an artist—the orneriest, most subtle, most trap-defying subject that a biographer might possibly attempt. What makes a person an artist? what makes an artist a great artist? what can we agree on about the nature of the work we call art? The artist is so difficult a subject that the most common or popular word for the core of the story is genius. *Chekhov was a genius*. The word in most mouths is meant to distance, contain, and explain what's quicksilver in the hand and befuddling to consider.

Ed Sanders has taken it on and has taken marvelous care to weave in social context and catch-up facts for the readers who don't know this particular history. He uses a parallel biography of Lenin as counterpoint throughout—and presents

no material too daunting for a junior high school library biography, nothing that couldn't be in a tired suburbanite's Broadway musical. I prefer the library figure because Sanders lays out the data without the kind of exploitation I'd expect from Broadway.

For example: the facts and images delineating Chekhov's twenty-year-long TB infection are skillfully selected and presented with a delicacy and respect so long gone from popular writing that you may be almost shocked that you're not being invited to slobber.

In academically respectable biography, by contrast, in the kind of treatment that would explore intellectual/aesthetic matters almost totally missing here, readers are invited to analyze and observe but rarely to feel anything.

A dichotomy like that is what the marvelous "Otherstream"\* tradition—calls bullshit. But Chekhov doesn't destroy this either/or construct by taking on both emotional and aesthetic/intellectual tigers. Naggingly, I want a different book or, put the other way, I keep wondering, why is the subject Chekhov?

One could make a long list of what Chekhov wasn't: not a political radical, not a social rebel, not a politician, not a scene-maker, not a leader or catalyst....The most exciting part of his life was lived alone in a room, in his head, in silent unknowable conversations with pieces of paper, working through processes long ago burned away like dross, leaving—obdurately complete—works of art behind. This most practical of angry men, whose need to change the world in which he found himself could not have taken a more opposite shape than Pound's, or Olson's, or Lenin's. Chekhov feared philosopher-kings. He surely didn't identify with them. Was he anti-Semitic? Yes. And no. Was he a male chauvinist? Yes and yes. He cared passionately about women's access to sexual freedom (and about being the happy beneficiary of same!) and he longed for

### THE DANSPACE PROJECT

Sept 28-Oct 1 Jeremy Nelson & Luis Lara

Oct 5-8 Bill Young

Oct 15 Draftwork: Wendell Beavers

Oct 12-15 Prowess DanceArts

Oct 21 Artist's Advisory Board Benefit

Oct 26-29 Sean Curran

Nov 3-5 FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Nov 16-19 Fred Darsow

Nov 19 Draftwork Nicholas Leichter

Nov 30 & Dec 2-3 Peter Cramer

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