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Two books by Alice Notley. *Closer to me & Closer . . .* (The Language of Heaven and Désamcre. O Books. 1995.)

we know no rule  
of procedure,

we are voyagers, discovers  
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

come closer & watch me cry for  
Watch me cry for new air  
If there is no time, what is there

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 join together into one, separate again into "he" and "she," and then the borders collapse. And that's about knowing, her fathers 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 & entanglement  
is wholeness,  
is one man, or one stone, one  
soul.

Two tiny voices talk within and on a broken map of consciousness, a near-sleep dream  
and then they/she awaken--

I am all poet, not speaking  
You are all poet, speaking  
You can be  
heaven on earth

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.

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And then I stumble into Désamcre--

'I have such a sadness,' Amcre 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 disallusionment after WWII, Vietnam and the 80's. Her quest is to bring the lightness, playfulness and hope of Robert Desnos' surreal poetry back into her character, Amcre's poetry, to affirm the mystical, magical, chance, revelation; to birth poetry again, as evocative, to come out of the desert of rationality (psychologism & sociologism & scientism)--

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, Amcre, the woman poet, writes a series of surreal desert poems in which the voices of bitterness & hope, Amcre & Desnos are intertwined. Even though in Désamcre, 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 Désamcre 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  
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