

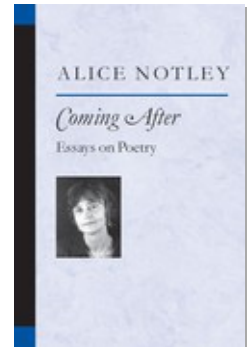


PROJECT MUSE®

Coming After

Notley, Alice

Published by University of Michigan Press



➔ For additional information about this book

<http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780472026241>

The “Feminine” Epic

This talk will mostly concern my book-length poem *The Descent of Alette* and will be both personal and literary, unapologetically. Would Dante come to talk to you about *The Divine Comedy* and not refer to his banishment from Florence? Of course I don't mean that I'm like Dante; I mean that my poem comes out of what I know that's communal knowledge and that I've suffered privately. Like a soldier, like anyone touched by political madness. In the mid-eighties I'd begun to wonder if it was possible for me to write an epic, I mean I'd begun to wonder dispassionately about the form. But there was a crucial moment. My brother, who'd been a sniper in Vietnam, was beginning to be in emotional trouble; and one afternoon I stood in my apartment in New York and thought to myself, just exactly this clumsily, “What if my brother in Vietnam was like a Nazi, and I by extension am? And what if I therefore owe an epic?” I wasn't sure to whom I might owe the poem. That moment closed over and I didn't think about the connection between my brother and epic for a year or two more. It was the same time it took for me to arrive at a formulation of the difficulty of being a woman and wanting to write an epic.

I began to move towards the epic first out of a sense of the twentieth-century “Big Poem.” I'd become interested in Olson again, mostly in terms of his geologic-mythological connection. The earth has a past, and present, formed in rupture by godlike forces. And his presentation of pieces, beauty of fragmentary past, and present, as reflected in the look and feel of *Maximus*. But I started to be intrigued by the possibility of telling a *continuous* story, not in the manner of Olson, Pound, Williams, but

Delivered as a talk at the New York State Writers Institute, SUNY Albany (October 1995).

more in the manner of Dante or Homer. Because it seemed so difficult; and I already knew how to negotiate pieces. So many people in this century seem to.

Meanwhile, and this is as important as any talk of technique and strategy and aesthetic, my brother began to enter a state of extreme crisis which I (we) came to understand too gradually and too late. He developed acute post-traumatic stress disorder, became heavily addicted to drugs, was admitted to a succession of hospitals which didn't seem to know how to treat him; finally entered a rehab and underwent a kind of cure. That is he kicked the drugs and found out a lot about himself, managed, in his mind, to give some of the guilt back to the national community, where it belonged, but still died, accidentally OD'd a week after leaving that rehab.

An earlier death as well was part of this process. Kate Berrigan, my stepdaughter, died in a traffic accident a year before my brother, and in her honor I made my first attempt at something epic in scale, since being devastated by her death, I felt close to large dangerous powers. I kept trying, in what turned out finally to be a not-that-long (thirty-some page) sequence, called *Beginning With a Stain*, to find a story for beginnings. The beginning of the universe, the beginning of living again after someone loved has died. But I didn't really have a story to tell, or a cast of characters, so I couldn't make an epic. Then, the year afterwards, as my brother began to move towards his death, I began work on a poem, "White Phosphorus," which became his elegy. At this point I began to grapple with the idea of a female or feminist epic—but not calling it that in my mind, rather, an epic by a woman or from a woman's vantage. Suddenly I, and more than myself, my sister-in-law and my mother, were being used, mangled, by the forces which produce epic, and we had no say in the matter, never had, and worse had no story ourselves. We hadn't acted. We hadn't gone to war. We certainly hadn't been "at court" (in the regal sense), weren't involved in governmental power structures, didn't have voices which participated in public political discussion. We got to suffer, but without a trajectory. We didn't even get to behave badly, or hurt anyone as a consequence (that would have been a story). I made my poem "White Phosphorus" be somewhat about this subject, and it like *Beginning With a Stain* had something epic about it, but it wasn't an Epic, though

it had a partly Homeric sound. But I made a prosodic breakthrough writing it, developing further a measure or method I'd stumbled on while writing "Stain." The last two poems in "Stain" are written in a chorale-like way, in long lines divided into phrases set off by quotation marks. Here is an example:

"In that dark before a messenger was released" "&
do we return there?" "in that dark" "but, and dreams" "I
have never drea . . ." "in our dreams we catch up with the story, and
the darkens-back-to-the-first-dream, the fragrant" "it wasn't
fragrant," "in this dream of the first dark, I" "it wasn't dark"
"dark as water silk dark quiet no-limbs dark, no-skin dark, it's
so dark, but, not foreboding or heavy" "it isn't
dark"

These are singing, dialogic, quarreling voices. In "White Phosphorus" the voices are unified and the measure begins to regularize:

"Whose heart" "might be lost?" "Whose mask is this?" "Who has a mask
& a heart?" "Has your money" "been published, been shown?" "Who can &
can't breathe?" "Who went" "to Vietnam?" ("We know who died *there*")
"This was then" "Is now." "Whose heart?" "All our heart" "the national
heart" "Whose mask?" "has its own heart?" "A mother's" "mask"
"Whose money" "do we mean?" "A woman's money" "Woman's money" . . .

It was the discovery of this measure that made writing *The Descent of Alette* possible—that and finding a way for a woman to act, to commit actions, enact a story, that suited the genre of epic. With regard to the measure part, I don't think you can write a real epic (as opposed to the twentieth-century Big Poem) without some, even a lot of, regularity of line. I wanted something regular, but also catchy—not some prosy long-line spinoff of the what-had-come-before; I'm afraid I wanted something all my own. As I worked on the first part of *Alette*, the line of the previous two poems evolved into something I could depend on, not think about, have to invent while I was inventing the story. I needed more freedom to tell the story than a constantly changing metrics would allow me. Thus I arrived at, and stuck with, a four-line stanza, each line of which consists usually of three to four feet or phrases:

“A man” “in a suit” “in the first car the” “front car of the train—”
“This older” “distinguished man” “asked me to” “ride with him”
“join him” “I declined &” “moved back” “far back, I” “joined a
car” “that contained” “women &” “girl children” “women in skirts”
“girls in dresses”

I’ve never analyzed the measure in its smallest parts, the actual phrases. The measure itself has been called, in effect, feminine, or at any rate a break with the male conventions of line and layout. I don’t particularly think that that is the case. My line owes something to other poets including both men and women: William Carlos Williams certainly, H. D. probably, Leslie Scalapino a little, John Giorno a little, Bob Dylan a little, others. However I discovered that after I’d finished the poem. Furthermore while writing *Alette*, and now too, I thought of this measure as My Measure, that “My” not being sexed in my mind, even though the poem is finally predominantly feminist. How could a measure possibly have a sex?

The story part is different, its technique, for me, is sexed. Well I *don’t* act. I don’t even believe in acting, at least not very much. Why did I want to write about a woman of action if women don’t act and if I don’t really approve of deeds? I do live and some sort of action in time is entailed in living itself. And I wanted, and still want, flatly, to write an epic—to take back some of what the novel has stolen from poetry and, further, to avenge my sex for having “greatness” stolen from it. This may be ambitious, and even self-aggrandizing, but also it may be necessary. But actually I like stories, though not so much in novels; I like them in poetry, where they’re more compressed and elegant, where the movement of the story is reinforced by the movement of the lines. I wanted to tell myself one of those. I discovered meanwhile the Sumerian epic *The Descent of Inanna*. In combination with my observations on dreams and on myth, this poem pointed me in the right “story” direction.

May I summarize briefly the story of *The Descent of Inanna*? Inanna, the queen of Heaven and Earth, puts on all her royal trappings and symbols, and goes down to the Underworld, her sister Erishkegal’s domain. She tells her servant that the other gods must be informed if she doesn’t return soon. Why she goes is not explained except insofar as the Underworld has attracted

her focus. When she arrives in the Underworld her sister orders that she be stripped of her clothes and her powers, presumably like any person at that door; her sister fixes the eye of death upon her and she is hung up naked, dead, on a meat hook. Soon her servant begins to visit the gods to plead for their aid, but only one god, Enki, doesn't think she's "gone too far this time." He makes two creatures from his fingernail dirt and sends them on down to the Underworld to help Inanna. Mysteriously, when they arrive, Erishkegal is in labor, naked—she's always naked—lying moaning on a bed. The creatures sympathize with her as she moans (she doesn't actually give birth, again as in a dream she's simply "in labor"), so she offers them a present, "the river" in fact. They ask instead for Inanna who is then magically brought back to life. But she has to find a substitute for herself, for her death: someone to take her place in the Underworld. She returns to the Upper World surrounded by the *galla*, demons from the Underworld who will make her choose a substitute, but everyone—her son, her servant, etc.—loves her, has mourned her, how can she banish one of these to the Underworld? Hah! her husband Dumuzi isn't in mourning, but happily sits on *her* throne; she fixes the eye of death upon him, as her sister had upon her. He runs, hides, pursued by the *galla*, changes form several times to escape them, is then betrayed by a friend who reveals his current hiding place. But he has a sister who hadn't betrayed him even when tortured by the *galla*, Geshtinanna the goddess of wine and poetry. When he's finally caught a deal is cut whereby he and Geshtinanna will take alternate six months in the Underworld. So it's then a pretty familiar working out of seasonal patterns.

Inanna is a long chanted poem presumed to accompany religious ritual. It contains symbolic action, mythological or dream-like action, the kind of action women do participate in, at night in sleep, or deep in their psyches, when they tell themselves secret stories about their lives, when they tell themselves stories almost without knowing they are. *Inanna's* story is linear but not natural and full of spaces; not all meanings are told or strings tied up. The main protagonist is a woman, the most significant other protagonists, except for Dumuzi, are also women. It isn't a "woman's poem" though, it's about forces—life, death, birth, rebirth—since those are what goddesses are, they're not people.

Inanna doesn't "act," she does nothing but show up in the Underworld, die, get revived, and choose a replacement. Compare that with the *Iliad*. I found I could use such a poem, though not very closely, as a model. My poem isn't really like *Inanna* except insofar as Alette descends into an underworld, and insofar as the action of my poem is mythological.

May I tell the story of my poem? The protagonist at the beginning has no name, no identity or memory. Finds herself in a vast subway system ruled by a well-educated, well-bred, multi-talented male Tyrant who lives aboveground. The protagonist wanders from subway car to subway car, station to station, observing the misery and minute particulars of the Tyrant's control. There are animals and also metamorphoses in this system, and she begins to be aware of a connection to a snake and to an owl. She also begins to know she is on a quest to find "our mother," the First Woman, whoever that might be. Finally she gets on a different kind of train which dissolves and leaves her floating to a lower level of existence, a set of caverns representing the psyche. As she proceeds from cavern to cavern, in a way reminiscent of her progress through the subway system, she is presented with explanatory tableaux or dreams, which show piecemeal the structure of the self below its surface. She also picks up the trail of the First Woman, who may be a snake. At the end of these caves she participates in a sort of lottery, draws a card, the Ace of Panthers/Roses, which signifies that it is she who must kill the Tyrant. Then she descends a staircase to a further level of being, a natural but entirely dark setting, a potential paradise which contains no light from the sky. There she finds the First Woman, not really a snake though that has been her symbol—but headless: her head is always nearby. The First Woman tells her story, and the protagonist assists in the replacement of the First Woman's head; then the First Woman begins to place stars in the sky, simply by speaking. The protagonist leaves her and meets up with the owl, who performs on her a brutal ritual "death," in order to give her "grace" and the owl attributes of flight, a beak, and talons: weapons. Now ready for the Tyrant she ascends to his mansion, a huge literal Museum of Natural History. They tour the museum with its displays and dioramas. The Tyrant informs her he can't be killed because he literally is the world and not at all a person. They reenter the subway world to-

gether, take a train to the River Street stop, outside of which flows a dark river. The protagonist sees a black tattered cloth floating on its blood-black waters, and having swallowed the cloth she regains her memory and her name: she is Alette and is in mourning for her brother who died in one of the Tyrant's manipulative wars. There is a pursuit, a sort of combat, and she does kill the Tyrant, discovers the one way to do so, which involves use of her owl powers. Then the doors of the subway unlock, people emerge, and the world begins again in open air.

To highlight some of the feminine or feminist elements of the poem:

I deliberately reversed the Dantean, Christian, and other religious direction of "enlightenment," making it a descent into darkness. That is explicit in the poem as a defiance of male tradition. Enlightenment is seen as a male luxury.

One of the major story elements of the poem is the search for the First Woman. She, as I've said, turns out to live on the lowest level below the ground and to be headless. One of my poet friends accused me of making simply an Earth Mother. As if that were a bad (un-avant-garde) thing. But she isn't an Earth Mother, she has gone to live "below" rather than "above," to escape the degradation she'd experienced in the upper world. Her most marked quality is that she's a storyteller: though she has no operative mouth, being headless, she can speak from the throat, and she has the ability to make you *be in* her stories. Really then she's like the source of dreams. Perhaps I'm saying that the split between conscious and unconscious began with the almost universal banishment of women from public and political life. To make her a storyteller here is to suggest that dreams are stories and women are the world's veritable dream-masters.

Other fables throughout the poem relate directly to feminism. The poem is in fact saturated with such material, though the Tyrant's subjugation is more than a subjugation of women: it's a control of the forms of most people's lives, of everything except death and the more profound reaches of spirituality. I wrote this poem in the late eighties, in New York, when suddenly the homeless were everywhere. My personal problems—my brother's death and my powerlessness, even my lack of literary recognition—were part of the general problem. I thought I had discovered all by myself the concept of the Dead

White Male, the Tyrant being one of those who never dies. Because only *they* were talked about again in the eighties, as if the sixties and seventies had never happened. As if someone like myself would never count. When I first heard of DWM in the media, I knew my poem was true and my thinking was right. And public. As an epic traditionally is.



At a certain point the problem of the poem became, can one kill? No, one can't, but the Tyrant isn't alive, he's everything that isn't natural being. So Alette *can* kill him. I began the last book, in which he's killed, three times; I couldn't get him till I found out he wasn't a person so I didn't have to hate him. He's based physically on two men I like very much (I'll never tell their names). Some people really like him: "I was on the Tyrant's side myself," the writer Johnny Stanton said to me after a public reading of Book Four. It seems traditional to epic that the other side be attractive. In the *Iliad* which side is "ours"? In Milton . . . Satan. In Dante, Satan is a beast, but Hell itself makes the more popular poem. But I was "mad at" all the epic authors when I wrote *Alette*: they were my own fair enemy and they, too, were the Tyrant.

I didn't know I was still writing, so specifically, about my brother's death until midway through the last book. That's exactly the point where Alette remembers her name. My brother's name was Al, mine is Alice: "Alette" is more like "girl-owl." In another poem I call it "owl-appendage," as "-ette" appends. In a world of war like the one we live in, woman is appendage certainly, even if she joins the army. After I discovered that my brother was behind the poem, I went back and built him more into it. Though I was writing it because of him, all along, I'd forgotten, because the poem isn't personal, it's public. Though feminist it includes everyone. It's dedicated to my father, another Al, because he's the owl in Book Three. Alette's father has died and become "natural," an owl, and so is able to show her how to be powerful enough, from Nature, to overcome the Tyrant. You kill him with Nature, since he isn't natural. It's possible to kill Nature for a time in a small space—a planet even; but there's always the Universe, the larger Nature. It's a winner, certainly. It swallows this planet.

I've since written two smaller narrative books, one of which is perhaps epic-like; the other is more of a poetics or book of spirituality or both. I wrote the latter soon after *Alette*. It deals very little with the literary or life problem of being a woman. I had discovered a further problem: the nature of the "black lake." In *Alette* the third or lower level of being would be Paradise—ultimate unexclusive self-realization I guess, except for the Tyrant, because of whom it can *never* be Paradise. Women are outside of any named Paradise or Heaven or Nirvana, they are stuck in history waiting for it (history) to be righted. They have not participated in the dialogues of Paradise, they have not founded religions, they have not been represented at the inception of any meditative or spiritual tradition, they are "-ettes." Alette's father, the owl, like the First Woman, is as well only in the quasi-Paradise. He is unintellectual, he is natural, isn't religious even. However in the middle of the third level there is the black lake, the gate to the rest of the universe, death, infinity, the one place beyond the Tyrant's reach. I realized, after *Alette*, that I had to think about that lake in my own way. My book *Close to me . . . & Closer (The Language of Heaven)* is an attempt to contact death. It's a dialogue between a dead father and his daughter, in which he who in life was not intellectual or in the least well-educated or well-read attempts to tell her what "heaven" or "death" is like. He speaks his philosophy. He talks in prose, she responds in poems; he gets interested in poetry, she starts to talk in his stumbling manner. Their identities gradually merge, at least for a time, and she is able to enter, briefly, "god's room."

Writing *Close to me* made me happy, but then I became gloomy again and wrote the more feminine-epic-like book *Désamère*. *Désamère* is another work which focuses, at least partly anyway, on the dead soldier-brother; it more focuses on global ecological destruction. The problems it confronts have become bigger than those of sexism and war and poverty, since the future is seen as a negative, a desert. The poem is shorter perhaps because the problem is bigger . . . there's no one to kill, in this poem, because the machine of natural obliteration can't be stopped. However, as far as "feminine epic" goes as a form, I can say that the poem has a heroine, Amère who becomes Désamère, inspired by the dead French poet Robert Desnos, an oracular presence in this poem, to try to become something like an old-fashioned saint.

Thus she enters the heart of the desert and is tempted by a Satan, a glibly pro-Human psychologist, whom she does sleep with, but whose ultimate wiles—the mind-fuck into consorting with society, as it exists—she resists. Instead she writes visionary poetry before returning to what's left of human society to Help Out.

Since then. I still want to write an Epic. I know that some poems of Emily Dickinson's are as Epic as an Epic. Yet I want to write that large public poem. I want to discover a woman's voice that can encompass our true story existing on conscious and unconscious levels, in the literal present, witnessing more than one culture. We live in that total international multicultural natureless world. I may have to sound even more different from the traditional epic: I may have to sound funnier or more eccentric to do it properly this time. I mean I'm thinking about it again. I'm writing currently as a unified authorial "I" who Must Speak. There may not be a story next time I write Epic, there may be something more circuitous than recognized Time and Story, more winding, double-back. There will certainly be a Voice. I think it is essential that people like myself, and my brother, be heard: I can only do this by speaking out clearly. So perhaps I will write the epic of "my voice." That might be epic, something other than I'd thought might now be epic. A voice itself. A woman's voice. A woman's voice with access to the mystery of the dream.