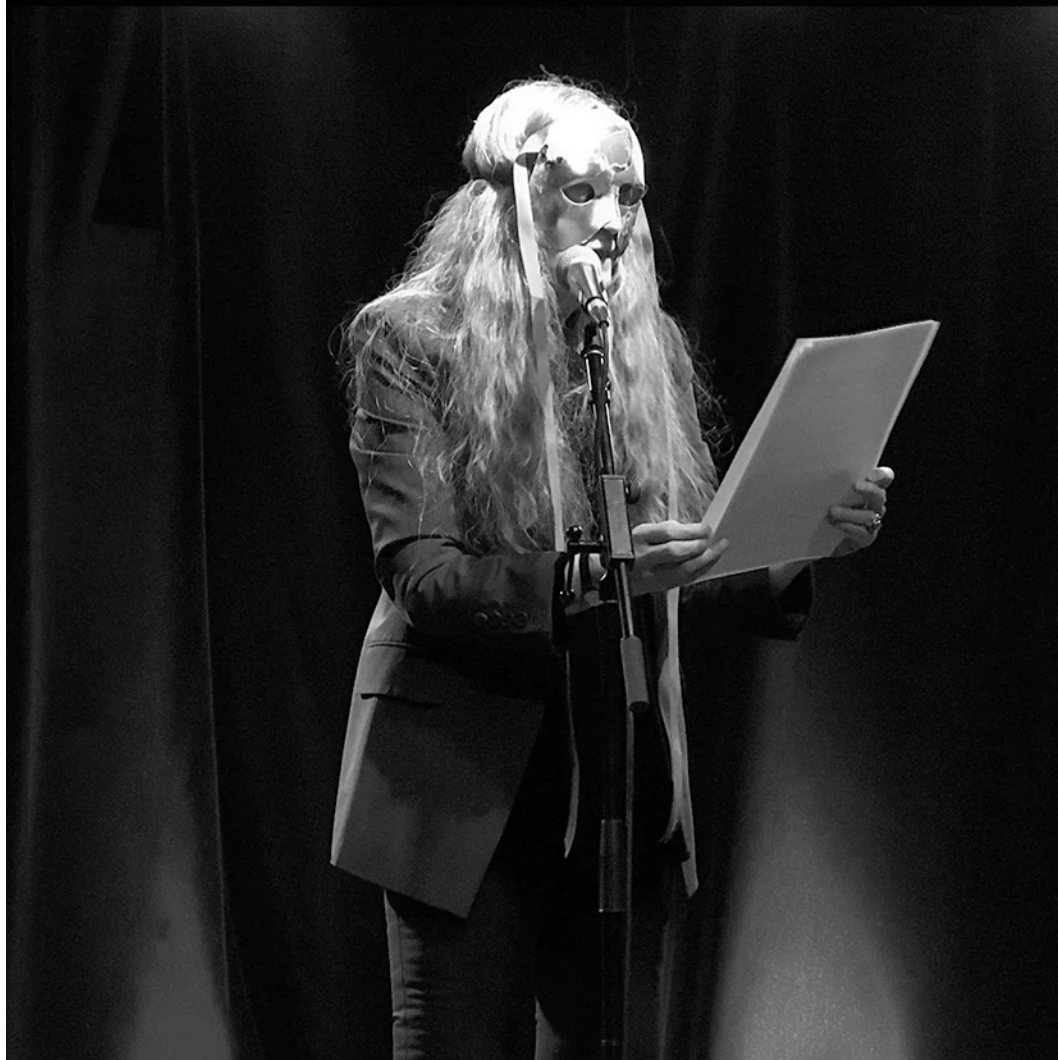


Telling the Truth as It Comes Up
Selected Talks & Essays 1991-2018

Alice
Notley

The Song Cave





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The Poetics of Disobedience

For a long time I've seen my job as bound up with the necessity of non-compliance with pressures, dictates, atmospheres of, variously, poetic factions, society at large, my own past practices as well. For a long time—well in fact since the beginning, since I learned how to be a poet inside the more rebellious more outlawish wing of poetry; though learning itself meant a kind of obedience, so like most words the Dis word, the Dis form, cannot be worshipped either—and that would be an obedience anyway. I've spoken in other places of the problems, too, of subjects that hadn't been broached much in poetry and of how it seemed one had to disobey the past and the practices of literary males in order to talk about what was going on most literarily around one, the pregnant body, and babies for example. There were no babies in poetry then. How could that have been? What are we leaving out now? Usually what's exactly in front of the eyes ears nose and mouth, in front of the mind, but it seems as if one must disobey everyone else in order to see at all. This is a persistent feeling in a poet but staying alert to all the ways one is coerced into denying experience, sense and reason is a huge task. I recently completed a very long poem called *Disobedience* but I didn't realize that disobeying was what I was doing, what perhaps I'd always been doing until the beginning of the end of it, though the tone throughout was one of rejection of everything I was supposed to be or to affirm, all the poetries all the groups the clothes the gangs the governments the feelings and reasons.

I seem to start with my poem *The Descent of Alette* these days, what-

ever it is that I am now seems to start there. It was for me an immense act of rebellion against dominant social forces, against the fragmented forms of modern poetry, against the way a poem was supposed to look according to both past and contemporary practice. It begins in pieces and ends whole, narrated by an I who doesn't know her name and whose name when she finds it means appendage of a male name; her important name is I. I stand with this, and with the urgency that saying I creates, a facing up to sheer presence, death and responsibility, the potential for blowing away all the gauze. In two subsequent narrative poem/proses, *Close to me . . . & Closer (The Language of Heaven)* and *Désamère* I felt myself pushing against ideas of reality as solely what's visible and in what shapes and colors it's said to be visible, against the idea that religion is solely an organized affair, against the pervasive idea that one must not protest what everyone else has named the Actual—how can you fight Reality?—against the psychology of belonging, of aiding and abetting. *Désamère* especially is about not wanting to belong and the process of ceasing to belong to the extent that's possible. All three of those works are characterized by emphatic though variable metrical patterns, in the prose as well as the poetry parts; two are very quirky as to physical presentation; all three have narratives that tend to the fabular.

In a book that will soon be published, *Mysteries of Small Houses*, I was firstly trying to realize the first person singular as fully and nakedly as possible, saying "I" in such a way as to make myself really nervous, really blowing away the gauze and making myself too scared of life and death to care what anyone thought of me or what I was going to say. Saying I in that way I tried to trace that I's path through my past. In a more subsidiary way I decided to go against my own sense that certain styles and forms I'd participated in formerly might be used up, that autobiography was, that the personal-sounding I (as opposed to the fictional I) might be, against the rumor that there's no self, though I've never understood that

word very well and how people use it now in any of the camps that use it pro or con—I guess I partly wrote *Mysteries* in order to understand it better. I came to the conclusion, in the final poem of the book, that self means ‘I’ and also means ‘poverty,’ it’s what one strips down to, who you are when you’ve stripped down.

It’s possible that my biggest act of disobedience has consistently, since I was an adolescent, been against the idea that all truth comes from books, really other people’s books. I hate the fact that whatever I say or write, someone reading or listening will try to find something out of their reading I “sound like.” ‘You sound just like . . .,’ ‘you remind me of . . .,’ ‘have you read . . .?’ I read all the time and I often believe what I read while I’m reading it, especially if it’s some trashy story; intense involvement in theories as well as stories seems difficult without temporary belief, but then it burns out. I’ve been trying to train myself for thirty or forty years not to believe anything anyone tells me. Not believing, then, became the crux of *Disobedience*, which is my most recent completed book. Not believing and telling the truth as it comes up. One of the main elements in the poem is an ongoing fantasy in which the I, who is pretty much I, keeps company and converses with a man very much like the actor Robert Mitchum and that of course is not strictly believable. On the other hand it’s fun, and it stands for something a sort of truth, about how we do have stories going on in our consciousness and unconsciousness all the time and about how we’re always talking to some “you” mentally. I wouldn’t expect you to take this book as the truth, I would expect you to go with it, given that you like to read. I find the act of reading puzzling at the moment, since in a book I’ve been working on since *Disobedience* I ask the reader to read despite the fact that I’m not really entertaining the reader or being clear in any of the traditional ways I can think of. I think books may imply a readership that simply likes to read, which may sound obvious but it’s something I myself have only just

thought of. But back to *Disobedience*. It asks the reader to read a lot of pages, about 230 A4 pages in verse, but it's fairly easy to read and it makes a lot of jokes. It's very feminist but men seem to enjoy it a lot, it possibly contains a rather virile approach to things riding roughshod and shooting at every little tin duck that seems to pop up. As I implied earlier, *Disobedience* didn't exactly set out to be disobedient; it set out actually to try to do the kinds of things I'd previously done in different poems all in the same poem, that is tell a story, interact with the so-called visible or phenomenal the despised daily, and explore the unconscious. But it got more and more pissed off as it confronted the political from an international vantage, dealt with being a woman in France, with turning fifty and being a poet and thus seemingly despised or at least ignored. The title popped up in a dream, a real dream I had towards the end of writing the work, in connection with a comic poet I know: it was the title of his book in the dream and I realized later that there was probably nothing more disobedient than being a comic poet, since no one's ever sure if that's good enough, particularly the academy unless you've been dead since the 14th century or unless you've also written a lot of tragedies. I myself wouldn't want the limitation of being only one kind of poet, but I realize this comic business is something to think about. But more and more as I wrote *Disobedience* I discovered I couldn't go along, with the government or governments, with radicals and certainly not conservatives or centrists, with radical poetics and certainly not with other poetics, with other women's feminisms, with any fucking thing at all; belonging to any of it was not only an infringement on my liberty but a veil over clear thinking.

It's necessary to maintain a state of disobedience against . . . everything. One must remain somehow, though how, open to any subject or form in principle, open to the possibility of liking, open to the possibility of using. I try to maintain no continuous restrictions in my poetics except

with regard to particular works, since writing at all means making some sort of choices. But NO DOCTRINES. Rather I tend to maintain a sense that a particular form or set of rules at a certain point might serve me for a while. Like many writers I feel ambivalent about words, I know they don't work, I know they aren't it. I don't in the least feel that everything is language. I have a sense that there has been language from the beginning, that it isn't fundamentally an invention. These are contradictory positions but positions are just words. I don't believe that the best poems are just words, I think they're the same as reality; I tend to think reality is poetry, and that that isn't words. But words are one way to get at reality/poetry, what we're in all the time. I think words are among us and everything else, mingling, fusing with, backing off from us and everything else.

Since *Disobedience*, I've been working on this other thing, called *Reason and Other Women*, which isn't as friendly as *Dis* is, though it isn't meant to be unfriendly. It's just hard to read, in that you have to decide to sit down and read it word by word giving each word the rhythm and weight it requires. That sounds like poetry but this one tends to be in long blowy sentences all down the page. I am going at several ideas at once: one is that the world is intensely telepathic, infused with the past and continual thought of all the living and all the dead. I started out with that idea and with the idea of a Byzantine church as a sort of head, mine, full of icons and mosaics on ever expanding and shifting walls. But the church or head got bigger and bigger and more and more full of images and words until it expanded into a city. So at the moment, on page one hundred and something, I'm dealing with the idea that there are two cities or worlds at the same time, an ideal crystalline one and the supposedly real one. Generally I'm neither all the way in one nor the other, though sometimes it seems as if I'm nowhere near the crystal one and its reason-

able opulence so I start beating hard at all the doors I can find in my mind. Then sometimes it seems as if the supposedly real world just isn't there or here at all though I know if I stop typing and go outside it will get me. This work is also very disobedient, in a way it picks up where *Disobedience* left off; but it doesn't lecture as much or shake its fist so, is less interested in the so-called real than in denying its existence in favor of the real real. You can't fly unless you're not on the ground and this one really flies sometimes.

I think I conceive of myself as disobeying my readership a lot. I began the new work in fact denying their existence; it seemed to me I needed most at this point to work on my own existence, so I couldn't afford to cater to them if they got in the way of my finding out things. But this is a work of mine, it should be published sometime. I'm now in a predicament I can't get out of, a form I can't manage for the reader, which just keeps leading me on and leading me on. It's predicated on leaving in as much mind fuzz as possible, that is being open to all that is out there in all telepathy—not a very organizable entity, the entity. Too wordy too long; and I've allowed in a lot of notions from my dreams again, have allowed odd images to take on the weight of truth; and I'm stubbornly involved again in what you might call mystical conceptions, but aren't those a no-no? except in icky New Age territory, yuck. The reader likes you to tell her/him what she/he already knows in a familiar form whether in mainstreameese or avant-gardese, but then there is the individual reader who is often not like that at all, who prefers poems to talking about them and has strange individual experiences with them. That's a very scary idea. It's possible that the reader, or maybe the ideal reader, is a very disobedient person a head/church/city entity her/himself full of soaring icons and the words of all the living and all the dead, who sees and listens to it all and never lets on that there's all this beautiful almost

undifferentiation inside, everything equal and almost undemarcated in the light of fundamental justice. And poker-faced puts up with the outer forms. As I do a lot of the time but not so much when I'm writing.

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