

# Review of *Songs and Stories of the Ghouls*, by Alice Notley

(Wesleyan)



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Alice Notley's recent work *Alma, or the Dead Woman* and *Reason and other Women* offers a sustained study of an alternative to what Tim Woods describes in *The Poetics of the Limit*, as an objectivist tenor in American modernism. Woods roots this objectivist aesthetics in an ethic of non-violence in which an absence of self, effected through a poetics that privileges restraint, would allow a thing to present itself without interpretive distortion. Woods would like us to accept a link between this ethic and earlier mystical and ascetic ethics of self-emptying. Notley unsettles this hope, remarking, in her essay *Voice*: "There is no way not to impose yourself as an author on your material"—the kind of thing a mother knows, even if the father doesn't. Notley works against the tradition Woods outlines because, for her, it is voice rather than image that carries the force of a poem.

In other contemporary critiques of the authorial subject the subject's place is also said to be unreal; the ability to speak is taken away; place and depth are deliberately flattened, dimension is effaced—the very differences or ranges that allow for poetic resonance are lost. But in Notley's work, selves speak, irrupt from grammatical surfaces, but are not erased or undercut, they sit instead adjacent, and in episodic/periodic conversation and drift. Notley does not presume

to give us an alterity with its mode of being free in love, but spelled touch and fractious care, in play with what form is, not what it is not.

The problem of course—and the likely reason we keep imagining modes of absence brought about by restraint—is that this implicates us in a violence. What’s to be done if we cannot get out of the way? [As an aside, its worth remembering that Pound refined his theory of the image while living in a cottage with Yeats who regularly chanted his work—listen to a recording of Yeats sometimes, and you’ll wonder how Ezra missed what was going on.]

Notley’s answer has been to work with the conceits of dream and trance in relation to the production of text. She had been using character and narrative as a rough frame for some time, but in *Alma, or the Dead Woman* and *Reason and other Women*, characters are not fully differentiated from each other, are actually several, and overlap, the way a figure in a dream is first your mother, then you, then your father. Often the voices are imagined as discarnate—of dead or those lingering in walls or murals. And they are not always kind—they spit and curse, they argue like Antigone.

Notley’s most recent book, *Songs and Stories of the Ghouls*, works over this ground again, but is significantly more accessible than the dense, difficult *Alma* and *Reason*. And, much like the difference, say, between *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*, this has its strengths and weaknesses—what’s gained will be readers who read the book from front to back, what’s lost is a magnificent wild fury and vision that is a record of something close to real.

But, this kind of thing may be necessary. In Tibet, there is a practice of becoming a treasure-text finder who seeks clues in dream and trance about the location of texts hidden long ago by the yogin Padmasambhava. Often what is found is not a text or scroll, but a rock or bone that is the material basis for a text-production by the treasure-finder. Treasure-finders often write several different autobiographical records in which the search for the text is related—one referred to as the public autobiography—and then several secret and hidden versions where the real story gets told for folks in the know.

*Songs and Stories of the Ghouls* also has a bit of the Grimm Brothers or Mother Goose hanging about it, which is not at all a bad thing. Maybe it’s the evocation of Greek Mythology that triggers that sense we are on known ground, maybe it’s that nothing too scary seems to be going on, even though the ghouls are feasting on colostomy-bag-

like blood sacs and are gathering, ever more numerous, “in the city”. It may also be that the narrative worlds of the two stories that constitute about half the book (the second of which contains a marvelous send-up of the Faustian scientist in the person of a coroner named Dark Ray) are more coherently realized than the backdrops to *Alma* or *Reason*.

As with Notley’s other recent work, *Ghouls* aims its complaint against a privileged, masculine order. That will unsettle some, but hopefully there are others like me who saw, even as children, that Medea had gotten a raw deal. There’s some wickedly funny stuff about male vanity and obtuseness that brought Dorothy Richardson or Ingeborg Bachmann to mind (not to mention William Burroughs), and it has the same dark awareness of the violence we do to each other, repetitively, to which a poet ought to speak.



A long time ago now I once went to a gathering of Anglo anti-nuclear and AIM activists to organize against uranium mining on the Navaho Reservation near Mt. Taylor. We were on reservation land on a ranch, and I recall the first Navaho speaker got up and talked, in Navaho and without translation, for about forty minutes. By the end, most of the Anglo activists were put off, insulted, but I got that a fact was being established—these folks had lives, a language we knew nothing about.

I also realized nothing was going to happen and went to work in the children’s tent.

That’s a different kind of politics, a different kind of ethic, but its where the heart is, and its what Notley and other women’s voices keep trying to tell us a poet might try. Masculine privilege in all its feathers does need to be undone, and I am glad to see she’s about it.