A Playful Reading of the Double Quotation in The Descent of Alette by Alice Notley

Feliz Lucia Molina

“We read (reread) the poems that keep the discourse with ourselves going.” – Wallace Stevens

“We have to break open words or sentences, too, and find what’s uttered in them.”– Gilles Deleuze

A word about the quotation marks. People ask about them, in the beginning; in the process of giving themselves up to reading the poem, they become comfortable with them, without necessarily thinking precisely about why they’re there. But they’re there, mostly to measure the poem. The phrases they enclose are poetic feet. If I had simply left white spaces between the phrases, the phrases would be read too fast for my musical intention. The quotation marks make the reader slow down and silently articulate – not slur over mentally – the phrases at the pace, and with the stresses, I intend. They also distance the narrative form myself. I am not Alette. Finally they may remind the reader that each phrase is a thing said by a voice: this is not a thought, or a record of thought process, this is a story, told.¹

“The Descent of Alette” “is an allegorical poem” “in four books” “first published” “in 1992” “by Alice Notley.” “In The Descent of Alette,” “the double quotation mark” “is wrapped around” “words, phrases, sometimes whole sentences, and utilized as bones for structure and tonality.” “The winged” “dbl quotation” “like angels or devils” “descending from elsewhere” “function as” “poetic feet.” “Distance” “in the text through the use of dbl quotes,” “according to Notley,” “was a way to distance” “her self” “from the narrative.”

I know someone who tattooed double quotes on her shoulder blades. In other words, the body is quotable. To be able to say that one is quotable. A body filled with other’s sayings. I never asked her what for, what is the double quote tattoo for and why on the shoulder blades? I prefer my own interpretation that keeps shifting every time I see her.

**First Words of Every Poem in Every Book**

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**Defamiliar Object**

“Poetry is a defamiliarized language, whose formations, so far from being simply formations of meaning, are aesthetic structures.…” \(^2\) “The same can be” “irresponsibly associated” “with the use of punctuation.” “The dbl quotation as a measure” “of poetic feet” “is treated as such” “because the author” “injects artfulness into it.” “The dbl quote is an object –” “a joystick” “to control breadth” “(of breath.)” “To de-familiarize” “said sign” “is also to” “impart the sensation of [it] as [it is] perceived and not as they are known.” \(^3\) “The dbl quote” “nests previous words, phrasings and sayings.” “How many have come and gone” “through the doorway of this punctuation sign.”

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\(^3\) Ibid., 77.
“There are also air quotes and virtual quotes.” “There is emphasis and there’s irony.” “It would be aggravating” “or interesting” “to watch a reading of” “The Descent of Alette” “with someone” “raising and curling” “fingers” “bent out of shape” “in what could be used as” “peace signs.” “I am trying to avoid” “scare quotes.” “I looked up” “what they are” “and supposedly they arose” “in the early 20th century.” “The scare quote” “is a mark around a word or phrase to indicate that it doesn’t signify conventional or literal meaning.” “This isn’t how Notley” “intended to use them” “in The Descent of Alette.” “The characters, places, and things” “signify nothing” “beyond” “their literal meaning” “within the allegory.” “I’d like to stress” “within the allegory;” “that’s why it’s” “italicized.” “It is told through” “the main character/voice of” “Alette.” “The author reminds us she is not Alette.” “The author marvelously found a way” “to distance” “her self” “from the narrative.” “This was attempted” “by tonal and intimate” “affect of the dbl quote” “used as poetic feet.” “It’s as though” “punctuation in this regard” “becomes a magical toy.” “Arguably, punctuation” “(as perceived)” “undergoes a kind of” “defamiliar” “make-over.” “The text” gently forces the reader” “to slow down,” “read slowly.” “At some point” “one begins” “to sense” “lines of text” “moving on its own.” “Broken words, phrases, and sentences” “shuttling left to right” “like a subway” “that stops” “from station to station;” “open quote to end quote.”

Double Quote Occupied
“There are two worlds; one above ground” “and one underground.” “The world above ground is where,” “the tyrant” “with a capital t” “lives.” “(The “T” gets tangled in the claws of the dbl quote.)” “Alette becomes an owl and kills him.” “In the last book the tyrant dies.”

“….the tyrant” “a man in charge of” “the fact” “that we were” “below the ground” “endlessly riding” “our trains, never surfacing” “A man who” “would make you pay” “so much” “to leave the subway” “that you don’t” “ever ask” “how much it is” “It is, in effect,” “all of you & more” “Most of which you already” “pay to live below” “But he would literally” “take your soul” “Which is what you are” “below the ground” “Your soul” “your soul rides” “this subway” “I saw” “on the subway a” “world of souls” 

“New York;” “the city of cities” “and its subways —” “worlds underground,” “above ground,” “& above the above ground.” “Skyscrapers,” “Wall Street,” “old money,” “new money,” “and falling further down a cleavage;” “the middle class” “slipping away.” “Contemporary artist” “Ligorano Re-

4 Alice Notley, The Descent of Alette, 3.
A global uprise of mass demonstrations; a cacophony of bodies on the street, in parks and universities, on City Hall lawns, coastal ports, neighborhoods, etc., and for what? The reasons are endless and finite. Not a single body is unaffected by the movement even when not “occupying.”

“Occupiers” “stormed into a Sotheby’s auction” “protesting” “via human microphone” “that the CEO takes home” “about” “six thousand dollars” “a day.” “(The a/Art market” “is not a reflection” “of a desire” “for a/Art” “but a reflection” “of a desire” “for money” “confused with a/Art.)”

What could it mean to occupy that which has been written or said? Someone with double quotes tattooed on both shoulders attempts to reclaim the sign; re-invent it privately-publicly since the body is always split between both spheres. A genre of hide-and-seek; the speaking and silent body which can never mean what it says even while it so desires to mean something. To nest (and hold hostage) someone in double quotes is an act of violence; a gesture of displacement where one is arrested, dislocated, and scrutinized under a distant gaze.

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“The air quote” “also known as” “finger quote or ersatz quote” “supposedly” “harks back to” “1927.” “The brevity of this gesture” “as something invisible” “like virtual money or credit” “doesn’t really exist” “though it take up space;” “it’s the ghostliest of all punctuation signs” “and one that re-quires the presence and appearance of a body.”

“she made a form” “in her mind” “an imaginary” “form” “to settle” “in her arms where” “the baby” “had been” “We saw her fiery arms” “cradle air…” “She cradled air…”

“The air” “gets occupied” “by one or two hands” “with thumb, forefinger, and middle finger” “which alternately could be used” “to shoot rubber bullets,” “pepper spray,” “tear gas.” “How three fingers” “could be responsible for so much;” “satire, sarcasm, irony” “and ultimately” “bruises, blood, death.” “(The violence of the dbl quote is to eagerly to place oneself inside a tornado.)” “The violence of this” “embodied punctuation mark” “stems from a discordance with others.” “Is the name, word, or phrase” “placed in dbl quotes” “heroic” “or brave?” “An act of displacement;” “must there always be” “bright or negative lights –” “a leaderless act” “to inhabit, to occupy” “space removed” “from normative use.” “Of course” “I’m also wondering” “what it means to re-occupy” “public/private space – the street,

5 Alice Notley, The Descent of Alette, 10.
neighborhood or page" "policed" "by laws, limits, and" "to some extent" "punctuation."

Echo, Mirror
“There are first, second, and third voices interwoven.” “Braid of voices,” “Some lines read as internal thoughts,” “dialogues,” “and scene descriptions,” “all of which make up the allegory.” “It seems appropriate” “for the word” “allegory” “to nest in double quotes” “for perhaps it might be” “a gesture to echo on and on” “eternally referencing” “whatever came before.”

I notice the first tooth of the double quote, when paying too close attention, gets caught in the hook of the “f”. I space bar to untangle them; the f does not resist the closed bite of “deaf” and I resist to know what it could mean, because it could doubly mean nothing.

“ ‘He looked’ ‘so familiar’ ‘to me….’” “The second-person” “echoes in one of two directions:” “further into” “or farther from” “me.” “It’s as though” “the second-person amplifies” “or else the opposite” “in which he,” “who looks so familiar,” “retreats further” “like stars in a telescope.” “The double quote” “has this kind of effect” “concerning distance and dimension” “as also illusory” “as something twice removed” “and unreal” “in a similar way” “movie stars are unreal and far away.”

“I entered” “a car” “in which I seemed” “to see double” “Each person I” “looked at seemed” “spread out” “as if doubled” “Gradually” “I perceived that” “each person” “was surrounded by a ghostly” “second image” “was encased in it” “& each” “of those images,” “those encasings,” “was exactly the same” “each was in fact” “the tyrant…”

A daydream of a mirror-less world while staring through window blinds; a palm tree behind. It was dark with nothing there. A world with no mirrors “in my mind,” though my mind could only reflect what it knew: a palm tree. Naturally then, palm trees multiplied; a world of palm trees reflected the daydream with no mirror in sight.

“The mirror” “prior to obsidian manufacturing ca. 6000 BC” “was wherever water” “could be found.” “It’s interesting” “mirrors have been around” “before humans – it’s funny” “animals and humans” “get born into” “a world of mirrors,” “therefore, simulation” “is always already” “a given –” “a sparkly consequence to be born with a double.”

6 Ibid., 9.
7 Ibid., 16.
8 Ibid., 12.