

THE SCARLET CABINET



A Compendium of Books by

**Alice Notley &
Douglas Oliver**

SCARLET EDITIONS

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Several of the books in *The Scarlet Cabinet* have had previous incarnations. *Penniless Politics* was published in a typescript facsimile edition by Hoarse Commerce (London, 1991). An early version of *Beginning With A Stain*, entitled *From A Work In Progress*, was published by the DIA Art Foundation (New York, 1988). *Homer's Art* was published for the Institute of Further Studies by Glover Publishing, Canton, NY, in 1990. Selections from the above and other works herein have appeared in the following publications: *Bombay Gin*, *Talisman*, *Poetica*, *Assemblage*, *Broadway 2*, *Brooklyn Review*, *o.blek*, *Ploughshares*, *Shiny*, *Avec*, *On the Ledge*, *Hambone*, *New Directions 55*, *Mudfish*, *dark ages clasp the daisy root*, *The Best American Poetry*, 1990, and, of course, *SCARLET*.

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Introduction

THERE is too much of human material now everywhere: the world is covered with "the man-made." None of our problems can be solved by making more of it, more of the material, including books. Shiny-covered, same-looking books everywhere. To go into a bookstore & be made sick by all the books there, is almost the same as to be made sick by all the dead cars in New Jersey, seen from the train window, early in the morning. All achievement, writerly & poetic achievement included, must become more invisible. The notion of "soul," of the Invisible, must be taken up again, as the world becomes more & more a piece of bricabrac, with books the same as everything else — detritus, anybody's effusions made tangible then quickly discarded. Many of the world's great achievements *have* been invisible in the past. The entire achievement of the Australian aborigines, for example, 40 to 50 thousand years worth of invisible spiritual wealth possessed by a people who wore no clothes, had no possessions, & lived in the desert. One is no longer entitled to write down every thought, rush it straight into print. Things must be thought out & saved in the air, in order to do less harm to the world. Obviously only the most memorable will be saved; obviously things will not be saved that only the author can remember.

To come at the issue from another place, if you were a woman amid the bombs in the 1991 Gulf War, your only sense of comfort would have come from the inside, not from the outside. Not from physiology or biology. Is such comfort an illusion? When people die who are close to one, comfort comes from a very much deepening widening sense of self — eternal, invisible something — mysterious, suprasensory something. It helps no one suffering now, right now, only to want to remake material structures in societies. That is the future that never comes — *they* are suffering *now*. The only help there ever is *now* comes from the invisible. And we cannot continue to fill this world with the man-made. We need a sky, we need a river, we need the outskirts of town & the mysterious lives of animals nearby. We can no longer tolerate seeing ourselves everywhere, for we are ugly & dirty & tasteless, because we have become so self-absorbed that we care for nothing but staying alive, staying material. The spaces within us are empty with words from books, images from screens, the day's boring routines: very much empty with the most superficial kinds of reasoning — from newspapers & politicians, & from academies which mass-produce trains of thought. We are the same as this ugly outer world we've made, we are outside entirely outside, but the world is no longer beautiful & original.

Poetry (including prose that is poetry, novels, stories that are poems) could be a force for the re-establishment of the invisible, for making people's inner lives more important than this constant assertion of substance. For poetry is not about words, or how one thinks, or making things. It is about essence — the secret inside the material. It uses rhythmic speech to tell what it knows, because measure helps the defining of essence, because whatever is done should be done attractively, because

rhythm is bound up with living. Poetry aims at truth. But the truth is not intellectual, it is the truth: that fact poetry knows, & academic disciplines do not. For example, a mythic essay at the truth is probably better than a run of polysyllables or equations, because figurative outlines & bright colors are easier to see & understand — & paradoxes are better resolved, & used, when they are not named paradoxes but are named Coyote or Athena. Poetry has had many uses in the past which are denied it now. It told stories, for example, often more quickly & more *essentially* than prose does — & taking up less bulk of pages, less of the physical & psychic space of the outer world. Movies, & most novels, are simply more dominating than poems are. They *impose* their stories, they impose minds upon us. Poetry's involvement with music formalizes it, beautifies, its aesthetics are more like nature's, less like a human's. What is made becomes mysterious, instantly, itself, even if what it tells is tragic.

Poetry, of course, has increasingly become an expression of the individual self, at least in this culture. Or an imposition of self, if you will. Partly people have become isolated from each other (& so one does say "I" instead of "we"); unifying beliefs have dissipated; one would like to protest against being one of the so many bodies there are (Science, ever the villain, having made humans so pervasive, beyond all reason). One feels that this personal "I" is too well known by now. Those who use it well will continue to bear important witness, but poetry cannot be brought out of isolation with the use of this isolated "I". The poet must prophesy the future, speak to it, educate it. A Whitmanic "I" might do that again — but then, that's been done. On the other hand one must not make poetry boring by reasoning the human figure, the poet with mouth & tongue, out of it — leaving only the mannered tracings of a mind which, by constantly denying its own existence as "someone," becomes of interest only to translators of difficult discourse, to critics. *Someone*, at this point, must take in hand the task of being everyone, & no one, as the first poets did. Someone must pay attention to the real spiritual needs of both her neighbors (not her poetic peers) & the future. We must find our voice, we must find a story — something that reproduces itself in the aether, not necessarily in bookstores. There must be a holy story, that is told again & again, that is known in the air, that satisfies without the temporality of successive pages, the terrible linearity of all these successive books.

The problem with changing — our ability to change — would seem to be that we can only change in ways that are implicated in prior ways of doing things. There *is* no revolution; nothing ever changes enough. By the logic of what I've been saying, (for it really is an "I" who has been speaking), Douglas Oliver & I shouldn't publish this book at all. By my same logic, though, we *should* be writing or making poetry. What should we do as it's made — merely read our work, at readings attended by people who already know it? Or should we keep trying to reach more people? We present *The Scarlet Cabinet* as a *different* book, an *economical* book, a *slightly less* self-aggrandizing book in the sense that two selves are sharing the same space. All the works herein are themselves dedicated to the re-establishment of the spiritual, the invisible, human world. We hope that they are better than us & better than the object this volume is.

Alice Notley, January 25, 1992, New York City

(...and a word more...)

Given what Alice Notley has just written, let me add: so we thought we'd put a publication together which made less of a fuss about being any one particular author's precious book designed to further an equally precious poetic "career". No-one has expressed better what it means to be a Reagan-Bush era poet than David Smith and David Bottoms as editors of *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets* (New York, Quill, 1985) as they characterize their contributors:

He, frequently she, is born between 1940, at the onset of World War II, and 1955, the third of Eisenhower's smiling presidential years. A child of suburban parents, television, and the nuclear nightmare, he is often the first in his family to complete college and escape a life of physical labor, the first to fight in or publicly oppose an unpopular national war, and among the first writers for whom intimate and personal revelation would not result in obscenity prosecution. He is also young enough to think of Vietnam as the war of the older brothers, of Haight-Ashbury as the scene of curious movies, of Martin Luther King, Jr., as a day off from school. He has one or more graduate degrees in literature or writing and teaches both in a college. Yet he is sometimes a lawyer, a psychotherapist, a businessman, a librarian, a filmmaker, a rock musician, or a sheepherder. On the average, he is thirty-seven years old, married with children, has been or is an editor of a literary magazine, has published widely, frequently translates poems from the Spanish, French, Hebrew, Swedish, Polish, and Italian, has been awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts or the Guggenheim Foundation, or both, and rarely lives where he grew up.

I won't scatter that with (*sic*)s. This, with its conscious and unconscious irony, has become a favorite piece of prose for me. It catches very well how powerful the US academy and writing schools such as Iowa have become in determining the most respected styles of poetry. Much worse, it shows that influence at work in imposing a cautious, conservative, middle-class, career-seeking *life-style* upon the poets of the academic cliques, even upon the radical ones. (As for rock stars, sheepherders, etc., we can count about one each in the Morrow anthology's 100+ choice.) Of course, this is just one -- the most socially pernicious and aesthetically narrow -- of U.S. poetic power-bases. Acquired fame as a mainstream "Giant", a Beat, a leader of ethnic or sex/gender causes, a performance/song poet, a fast-rapper, a language poet, a regional or city-based poet... allows you to join other cliques, which foster other poetic styles. We, with our own power-bases, can't get free of these modern "careers" but we think they betray the poetic, spiritual, and political assumptions of our own work. What you can't do in the orthodoxies of present-day publishing is be too unusual within your clique, or publish what you think is important *just because* it's not in currently favored genre "A" or "B" ("Quotation marks? What's *that*?") or, even, is regarded as played-out ("*Dialect* romance?").

Why not, we thought, publish a book rather like a chance collection of Medieval manuscripts bound into one volume, a book which thumbs its nose at all this? We only care about the spirit of what we write anyway: we don't care about the business-suited poetic world, or the NEA -- any of that. So why not have some fun?

Douglas Oliver, January 25, 1992, New York City

Two Poets Put Their Heads Together... And Came Up with a New Kind of Book

* * * * *

The Scarlet Cabinet is a unique concept in book compilation by two of the most active contemporary British and American poets. Taking their cue from medieval manuscripts bound, though diverse in theme, into one volume, Alice Notley and Douglas Oliver have assembled a collection that will catch the reader unawares. It begins with Douglas Oliver's *Penniless Politics*, a satire upon the world's most powerful nation whose voters just don't vote; it continues with a bravura Alice Notley performance, a central achievement in her career: the creation of a genuine feminine, city-wise epic, *The Descent of Allette*. Next comes the novel that Robert Louis Stevenson would have written if he had been a working-class feminist -- Douglas Oliver's romance, *Sophia Scarlett*, in which outlaws from society wrestle with the severities of a 17th century Scotland torn by religious wars. An important progression of poetic sequences by Alice Notley follows: *Twelve Poems Without Mask* -- poems in pursuit of a new feminine melody; *Beginning with a Stain*, which presents fragments of creation myth in response to the loss of a loved one; and *Homer's Art*, which confronts the whole notion of Homeric epic in the context of a female response to the Vietnam war and its aftermath. *The Scarlet Cabinet* concludes with *Nava Sutra*, a cosmological ethics created by Douglas Oliver.

What the critics say:

On *Penniless Politics*: "Oliver conjures up an extraordinary collection of characters ... ventriloquised with extraordinary gusto". Patrick Wright, *The Guardian*.

On *Homer's Art*: "She may well turn out to be, as a woman, our present-day Homer, a rare and authentic voice." Rudy Burckhardt, *The Poetry Project Newsletter*.

On *Beginning with a Stain*: "Alice Notley's expansive flight into language, dreams and cosmology... (takes in) a gradually broadening arc that finally includes all lovers." Tom Clark, *The San Francisco Poetry Chronicle*.

Of Douglas Oliver's poetry:

"...again and again, what impresses here is the management of extremity."
Michael Walters, *The Times Literary Supplement*.

"This is rare writing, something that leaves the world a little different."
Jeff Nuttall, *Time Out*.

Of Alice Notley's poetry:

"She's the Boss." Robert Creeley.

"Easily the most effective and authentic poet in many years to emerge from the Lower East Side division of what is loosely called 'The New York School.'" Peter Schjeldahl, *The New York Times Book Review*.

Cover art and design by Yvonne Jacquette

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