

WITZ

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LESLIE SCALAPINO:
LINGUISTIC APOCALYPSE
AND THE MAKING OF
CONSCIOUSNESS

By Susan Smith Nash

An art that struggles with the task of representing the making of consciousness is, by definition, apocalyptic, since it seeks to reveal or unveil the processes at work in both the making and the viewing of art.

The writings of Leslie Scalapino are concerned with how art represents both the making of consciousness, as well as the construction and destruction of meaning. Scalapino's writing often has a lighthearted or ironic quality, along with the visionary, almost mystical tone one might expect of an art that involves revelation sufficiently dramatic to be considered apocalyptic.

The relation between artistic representation and consciousness is perhaps a delicate one and needs to be carefully delineated before any analysis proceeds. First, consciousness can be described as the awareness of signs and their connection with meaning or meanings. Consciousness is a necessary condition for interpretation or explanation.

The act of representing consciousness can be described as the manipulation of language and literary form in a manner that creates a mirror image of how the mind makes meaning, constructs alternative interpretive possibilities, and admits the possibility of multiple versions of reality.

With an emphasis on the construction of consciousness, this section is adopting an approach which is highly Buddhist in orientation, although this is seemingly a contradiction, since apocalypse is primarily an aspect of Jewish or Christian texts. However, there are points in common, particularly in the Buddhist notion of lucidity and the Christian notion of unveiling (or apocalypse). In both cases, there is an underlying belief that what one observes as reality in the phenomenal world may not be anything more than a projection created by the mind. The truth is often obscured by sin, *maya*, or illusion. Once one gains lucidity or has experienced apocalypse, then it is possible

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to see things for what they are (or aren't).

It is appropriate to consider Leslie Scalapino's work in the context of linguistic apocalypse for several reasons. Scalapino's poetry utilizes words in a manner that heightens their paradoxical, self-destructive nature, and which heightens language's ambiguities and irreducibilities. Julia Kristeva describes some of the difficulties of language: "Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both" (Kristeva 93). Scalapino's poetry is always both semiotic and symbolic, and her poetic language functions to both contain and efface, both soak up and wipe dry the semiotic content. This is accomplished, in part, by what Scalapino calls "bringing the content up very close" (Scalapino "Letter" 1). With its emphasis on the complexities of language, Scalapino's work is apocalyptic — it reveals and uncovers language's paradoxes and reversals.

Leslie Scalapino was born July 25, 1947 in Santa Barbara, California, to parents who were highly involved in scholarship and the arts. Her father was a professor of political science at the University of California at Berkeley. Her mother was a musician and artist. Scalapino's earliest interests were in Chinese and Japanese history and culture, which were studied not just at home in California, but also during the family's extensive travels to Asia. While a child, Scalapino lived and travelled with her family in India, Japan, China, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Nepal. She cites the culture of these countries as a great influence on her writing; for example, she saw samurai films in Japan, and Indian cinema while in India.

Scalapino received much of her early education at home while in Japan or China. She was taught by her grandmother and her father, who emphasized Chinese and Japanese history. Later, she studied at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where she earned her bachelor's degree in literature. Later, she was a graduate student for two years at University of California at Berkeley. She began writing after graduation. Her earliest publications were *The Woman Who Could Read the Mind of Dogs* (1976) and *O and Other Poems*. The works analysed here are not all her published works, but they are the ones that best illustrate the apocalyptic elements within Scalapino's work.

Way. Published in 1988 by North Point Press, *Way* is comprised of a series of long poems. The format of the poems alternates between the brief, minimalist poems of

William Carlos Williams, which contain Emily Dickinson-style dashes, which are broken by long-line prose poems that recount the daily lives of individuals. The diction is informal, and while parts of the poem are narrative, the narrative unfolds in a non-linear fashion, with observations flashing like random thoughts in the mind.

Way is introduced by a quote from David Bohm's *Causality and Chance in Modern Physics*, which emphasizes the multiplicities of experience: "Nature may have in it an infinity of different kinds of things" (Scalapino *Way* 1). Bohm's quote sets the stage for Scalapino to create a series of long poems that reflect and build upon the notion that nature contains infinite variety, and that people and characters possess the capacity for innumerable manifestations. Scalapino's language has a similar protean quality and also reinforces Bohm's observation that "no such a thing can even remain identical with itself as time passes" (Scalapino *Way* 1).

Even human experience cannot remain identical with itself. When Scalapino tells a brief story about someone being hit by a bus, or when she talks about police harassment and riots, each retelling has a different feel, and a different angle. The way that Scalapino juxtaposes the events with seemingly unrelated information lends a sense of immediacy and urgency to the work. She replicates the experience or the sensation of living in the world, and she does it in such a manner that is disorienting to the point that it makes it new for the reader. The long poem, "bum series" reports on the homeless in clear, accessible terms:

the men — when I'd
been out in the cold weather — were
found lying on the street, having
died — from the weather; though
usually being there when it's warmer

(Scalapino *Way* 51)

Scalapino's long poem, "bum series," contains patterns of repetition which possess the function of wiping or expunging in the reader's consciousness any generic expectations. This happens when the repetitions disrupt (or wipe clean) the narrative and make it non-linear. Like the sponge in Derrida's *Signéponge*, the words in the poem create the poem's structure, and it simultaneously soaks up and erases meaning.

Structurally, the repetitions develop a theme about the difficulties of life in the city during harsh economic times, and how the homeless are dehumanized to the point they are simply considered "bums." When phrases containing the word "bums" are juxtaposed with other phrases, the poem makes a pointed political and cultural comment, and as such, it also raises class consciousness. The political powers-that-be are portrayed as being out of touch

and distant to the problems of the city and to the bums: “when our present / president is in an inverse / relation to them — when there’s / a social struggle” (Scalapino *Way* 55). Because “bum series” contains scenes from everyday life, mixed with a disconcerting structure — the intertwining repetition of phrases and words — reading the poem has the effect of allowing a distinct, heightened point of view to emerge. As a poem of protest and resistance, “bum series” is effective because it allows the reader to develop empathy and understanding. The poem rehumanizes the dehumanized subject “bums.”

In “the floating series” in *Way*, there are similar intertwining, repeating phrases. A woman is contemplating herself in relation to the world. Phrases such as “bud of the water lily” and “person dies from age” are repeated for a deeply sensuous effect. The woman in “the floating series” is seen as exploring her body in relation to the world, and as she does so, time seems to be suspended. The feeling is reminiscent of Gertrude Stein’s early writings which appeared in *Camera Work*, in which she spoke of constructing a poem so that it would perform the same task as film. According to Stein, film brings moments that occurred in the past into the present, to create the sense of a continual present. In her “difficult” style, Stein has found a writing format that is a verbal counterpart to the moving, often repeated images of film that slowly add up to represent a process. Like film, Stein’s writing becomes a discourse of process. Scalapino’s writing has the same often repeated words and images (in this case, “bums” and “dumb”), as if they are individual frames:

I have been — am —
dumb—as the way
in which that would occur — the
bums — not their existence or
dying from the weather — though
the effect of that

me to

dumb — to have

actually stupid—so that

could occur—the

bums—in an event

so—dumb as an
active relation to
the bums or to the freighter and
the still oil
rigs—on the ocean

(Scalapino *Way* 58).

The above example is only a fragment of the entire poem. There are more instances of the repetition in the poem — in fact, almost each stanza contains at least one of the repeated words or images. The repetition deconstructs the text so that it can be read as a unified whole — an entire poem — or as a series of fragments.

In addition to deconstructing the poem so that the assumptions about genre and figurative language are questioned, Scalapino also questions how the reader constructs meanings and understands figurative language. The construction of meaning is one process that Scalapino seeks to deconstruct. She wishes to analyze how the meanings of symbols are often socially or culturally determined. *Way* (1988) contains this issue at its core. From the very first page, the work critiques and questions how individuals habitually construct meaning from simply the most superficial appearance of things, even if this surface is an illusory veil, a screen of *maya* — the embodiment of sensory and mental self-deception. On the cover of *Way* are two photographs — first, a man and a woman in an embrace, with the caption “Couple Dancing in a Bar.” Second, placed next to the first, is a photograph of two bare-headed men who seem to be embracing. Entitled “Men Fighting on Sidewalk,” this photograph echoes the first in arrangement, giving rise to the notion that there are certain equivalencies between the two. Keeping in mind the axiomatic notion that there is no meaning without repetition, the photographs, which contain individuals in similar stances, makes the viewer wonder about the fundamental sameness of dancing and fighting. Both are representations of life — they concern themselves with how art represents or imitates life, human psychology, the human will, or the states of being which can be perceived by the individual, through independent sensory perception. For Scalapino, one might tend to think it is a matter of *mimesis*. However, Scalapino is more interested in finding where “taste” loses its influence over a piece of writing.

f o r

b e

been

really

How Phenomena Appear to Unfold. This collection of plays, essays, reviews, and critical writing is an essential companion to Scalapino’s other works because in it, she describes her techniques and explains her aesthetic and critical grounding. For example, the following quote provides insight into the long poems of *Way*, especially “bum series,” in which Scalapino begins with an observation about a homeless person, and then convolutes, repeats, and juxtaposes with other images and words. She describes the structure of the poem in the following manner: “a segment in the poem is the actual act or even itself — occurring long after it occurred; or acts put into it which occurred more recently” (Scalapino *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 21).

Scalapino notes that she is effecting the “repetition of historically real events the writing of which punches a hole in reality” (Scalapino *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 21). When Scalapino “punches a hole in reality,” she simultaneously rearranges the meaning of the original historical events. With the sequence of events, and the order rearranged, the meaning changes. Either the effect is apocalyptic in that there is a complete eradication or destruction of the original, or it is constructive in that the reader begins to become more aware of the process of seeing, or envisioning history. If the constructive approach is followed, history is viewed as a made event. To understand that history is artificial is one of Scalapino’s goals. Another is to understand that identity, or the self is also a made thing, in which the possibilities are endless: “The self is unraveled as an example in investigating particular historical events, which are potentially infinite” (Scalapino *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 21).

Like Gertrude Stein, Scalapino applies the technique of film to writing. Instead of only focusing on the idea that repetition of frames forestalls time and maintains the present tense, Scalapino looks at how film and filmmaking capture the essence of the human condition — how the mind perceives and orders a reality that is seen as external to oneself. Scalapino suggests that “the camera lens of writing is the split between oneself and reality” (Scalapino *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 22). In the essay, “Pattern — and the ‘Simulcral,’” Scalapino looks at Gertrude Stein’s application of film techniques to writing. For Stein, the emphasis is on the continual recasting and reformulating of reality: “Stein’s conception of a continuous present is when everything is unique, beginning again and again and again” (Scalapino *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 27). Here, Scalapino is referring to Stein’s essay, “Composition as Explanation,” which she first delivered at Cambridge University in the mid-1920s:

Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series.

Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing.

It is understood by this time that everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition (Stein 516).

Scalapino applies the ideas of Stein to other print media as well, including the comic book. Like the camera lens, the comic book frame also represents a split between oneself and reality insofar as writing creates a “speaking picture” of the world. In an essay on her writing, Scalapino states that she was thinking of the comic book format when she was writing “The Pearl,” part of the trilogy contained

in *The Return of Painting, The Pearl, and Orion*. In fact, she gives guidelines for reading the narrative. Each line or paragraph is a separate frame, even though the page is not divided into individual frames. Like film, the comic strip has the capacity to freeze narrative time so that events that have happened in the past are seeming to occur in the present tense. Scalapino observes that “cartoons are a self-revealing surface as the comic strip is continuous, multiple, and within it have simultaneous future and past dimensions” (Scalapino *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 22).

The fact that both the comic strip and film are able to repeat images from the past so that they seem to be a continually recycling the present may lead to the sense that the reality that they represent is an illusion. In the end, film and the comic strip, as well as writing techniques based on them only represent the medium itself, and its ability to repeat images endlessly. However, to reduce writing which utilizes comic strip and film techniques to simple self-reflexivity does not allow for other possibilities of interpretation to emerge. For example, if the text written in the form of a comic strip as Scalapino notes, “simultaneous future and past dimensions” then an effacement or wiping clean is constantly occurring to the past. At the same time, a construction process is underway as the future is projected. This is reminiscent of the *signéponge* (sign-sponge) function of language that Derrida refers to. It also implies a refusal to let history stand as others have constructed it and a need to constantly revise or resee the sequences of events.

Scalapino is interested in the refractory, multi-faceted qualities of words once they are mulled over in the mind. Her work reveals how quickly the mind orders and reorders perception, and how the words precipitate other reorderings:

Therefore my thought, and the events which are outside me — and really are me — and the world, are the same. Very painful events may seem to have longer reverberations which can cause their own reordering. This implies a syntax which in being read would require that the reader go through the process of its thought, have that thought again — and it’s therefore an act, one which has not occurred before (Scalapino, *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 70).

Scalapino’s innovative written-out comic book form is felt in many of her works. In the version of the comic book which Scalapino describes, the frame functions as the point of unveiling, or revelation of the true nature of the psyche. Yet the frame also suggests an entire history — a process from start to finish, and again, it involves transformation. In this sense, Scalapino’s work is a functioning example

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POEM'S TENSITY

By Mark DuCharme

Tension, or tensity, is an effect I first noticed while reading a short poem by Clark Coolidge, which we'll look at below. It is an effect that, to my knowledge, has not been adequately accounted for in conventional literary criticism, nor as such has it come under the purview of recent theorists. Certainly, the notion of the poetic value of tension is implicated in the work of the Russian formalist critics—&, in its focus upon the poem on the page, the idea bears at least a tentative relationship to New Criticism. However, it will be seen that I feel tension is of value precisely because it undermines or probematizes unity in the poetic work—whereas the New Critics read poems, however complex, as inherently unified, & whenever a poem made such a reading impossible this was seen as a flaw in the poetic, not in the critical paradigm.

The idea of tension is predicated on certain insights by poet-predecessors. John Keats in 1817 wrote of "*Negative Capability*," the capacity "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." This quality must, it seems to me, be accepted as a fundamental condition of the inquiring, active mind. Keats said this was characteristic of "a Man of Achievement especially in Literature," & I would add that it must be a trait of readers of poetry as well.

Two definitions of poetic image are illuminating in this context. "An 'Image,'" wrote Ezra Pound in 1913, "is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." Writing five years later, the poet Pierre Reverdy was even more specific: "The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is both distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality"

We are now ready to approach a definition of tension. Our concern is with tensity, or dissonance, *between elements* in a given poem. To understand this concept, it will be useful to think of the poem as simply a frame. This frame contains the words, phrases & sentences of the poem, as well as the arrangement of those words (i.e., use of line breaks, spacing on the page, etc.). It also contains all the possible meanings & connotations of those words, includ-

ing meanings the poet supposedly "did not intend," as well as all figurative, intertextual & musical devices (e.g. metonymy, allusion, assonance, rhythm). The sum total of the contents of this "frame" is what I call the elements of the poem. This corresponds roughly to the total referential & semiotic potentials the work sets into play.

Tension itself then is any sort of dissonance between two or more elements in the poem. This generally occurs between meanings, connotations or associations of words or phrases, but may also include the figurative & formal levels of language, insofar as these are constitutive of the poem's meaning(s). For example, a tension would be created by juxtaposing poetic-sounding diction with modern slang, because these constitute different social meanings.

Tension is hardly new as a poetic device. Irony, for example, is a specific type of tension. I believe that tension of a kind has always existed in poetry, & probably exists in all great poetry. Tension in fact distinguishes the poetic from other instances of language—& good poetry from mediocre—precisely insofar as it allows for competing meanings to enact themselves simultaneously, & for the physical elements of the poem to play an active role in meanings' construction.

Poems are not channels conveying meaning—even complex meanings—to the patient receiver; they are frameworks. Obviously any tension at any point along the framework affects the system as a whole.

A simple example of tension can be seen in this short poem by Clark Coolidge:

A
per
ginning
verted

In this radically disruptive work, what at first appear meaningless word fragments become potentially charged with meanings through active readerly involvement. Though fragments, the words do not exist in the isolation their form on the page implies. Though formally a list—perhaps something *torn* from a list—the poem's lines actually comprise a quatrain, & the poem achieves a brittle music which impels rereading. One reads such a poem *physically*. Physically, the first two lines are one syllable each, & each might be a prefix. The last two lines are two syllables each, & are recognizable as words missing their initial syllables. Further, "A" and "per" are each possible prefixes for the last line, "verted." Thus the poem achieves a relative symmetry, whose parts work in relations to each other (& here recall William Carlos Williams' famous description of poem as machine).

The third line, “ginning,” does not seem to fit this pattern. Obviously, the word is *beginning*, & in light of the symmetry described above the prefix “be-” is rather noticeably absent. This underlies a tension within the poem. At its simplest level, “(be-)ginning” connotes something very positive: birth, change, renewal. The connotations of the poem’s other possible words, “A/verted” and “per/verted,” are by contrast negative—something at the least unpleasant if not vaguely disturbing. Thus there is a clear tension in this poem between perceptibly positive & negative elements. This tension charges the poem—at once focusing & refracting possibilities of reference.

Obviously so minimal a work values vivacity—or a startling music—above complexity & the drone of signification. Thus the level of connotative tension is correspondingly simple. The fact that it is simple is not to be taken as indication of the poem’s relative value, as compared to more densely associational works. A poem such as Coolidge’s “A” forces us to read in ways with which we are unaccustomed. Yet it is always a function of the poetic to allow us to read & see in ways that are new to us—ways which differ from the socially agreed-on functions of daily language use. Great poetry always jars the reader toward such an engagement—and poetic tension is one means by which this effect is achieved.

Shakespeare, in Sonnet 36, sets up a tension in the play of similarity & difference—

Let me confess that we two must be twain
 Although our undivided loves are one;
 So shall those blots that do with me remain
 Without thy help by me be born alone.
 In our two loves there is but one respect,
 Though in our lives a separable spite
 Which, though it alter not love’s sole effect,
 Yet doth it steal sweet hours from love’s delight.
 I may not evermore acknowledge thee
 Lest my bewailed guilt do thee shame,
 Nor thou with public kindness honour me
 Unless thou take that honour from they name.
 But do not so. I love thee in such sort
 As, thou being mine, mine is thy good report.

Here the formal tension is, on one level, confined to the octave, in which Shakespeare brilliantly plays notions of singularity & duality—one & two—against each other. These concepts are mutually exclusive in western thought, yet Shakespeare sets up the notion of their difference only to continually undermine it in a series of striking rhetorical gestures.

Let me confess that we *two* must be *twain*
 Although our *undivided* loves are *one*

Here Shakespeare seduces our attention from meaning to the figurative level of the words themselves. *Two, twain; undivided, one*. The careful symmetry of these lines contrasts with & underscores the contradiction embedded in the statement; for although the speaker & his love “must be twain,” they are nonetheless unified & uniting in their mysteriously “undivided loves.” Here even the plural of the noun *loves* contradicts the most literal sense of the statement—undercutting meaning’s sway, even while yielding to a fragile referential artifice.

Without *thy* help [by] *me* [be] born alone

Shakespeare’s prosodic grammar juxtaposes the “thy” & the “me,” making these short words physically proximal on the line—constructing a similarity again quite independent of strict meaning. Here the alliterative “by” & “be” construct a parallel similarity, in contrast to the theme of difference & separation implicated in lines 1-4.

In our *two* [loves] there is but *one* [respect].
 Though in our [lives] a *separable* [spite]
 Which, though it alter not love’s *sole* effect,
 Yet doth it steal sweet hours from love’s delight.

Here the statement of lines 1-2 is reversed: the loves are now two, & the “one” of the sonnet’s opening statement seems less a blissful union than a “separable spite.” Here “sole” does not have the sense of, the only effect; rather, it suggests the effect of making sole, or making one—a double meaning that at once implies blissful union & separation—just as the tension between union & separation dominates this sonnet’s octave. Notice also the tension between “respect” & “spite,” even as the similarity of “loves” & “lives” is underscored by the relative positions of these words in the lines, & by their internal off-rhyme.

Such brilliant flourishes also suggest a tension between the passionate outpouring of a lover’s heart (this sonnet’s ostensible occasion) & the great technical prowess which the poet here exerts—a careful weighing of both melody & connotation. Thus the impassioned, fictively spontaneous address reconstitutes a technical rigor which is clearly not spontaneous, & in which a passion is subsumed. Further, the idea of play on the notions of singularity & duality—the I & the Other—suggests that on a metaphoric level this sonnet speaks to notions deeply implicated in the western philosophical tradition—which again contrasts with the conventions of poetic address to one’s lover, the passionate traditions of the sonnet.

This sonnet abruptly changes in its sestet. The formal play of one & two, the impassioned speech of the lonely lover, yield to concerns of a speaker who is somewhat

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READINGS & REVIEWS

Confronting the World

UNDER WORLD ARREST BY CLAYTON ESHLEMAN (BLACK SPARROW PRESS, 1994)

Reviewed by Dan Featherston

A few years ago, Clayton Eshleman told me about an incident in which he woke up one morning and saw something globelike hanging from the limb of a tree in his front lawn. Stepping out of the house, he noticed it was a painted, tinfoil “world” with shotgun shells tied to strings dangling around it. There was a chalkline beginning under the “world” that led out along the sidewalk. Eshleman followed the line for several blocks until it abruptly ended with a cryptic message: THE WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING YOU.

While reading Eshleman’s latest collection of poetry, I kept recalling this incident in relation to the book’s title, *Under World Arrest*: a play on “house arrest,” world/house rooted in *oikos* (eco logos, ecology)—our world residence, under arrest within both geopolitical house and “prison-house” of language:

I place myself under world arrest and refuse to release myself from the complexities of an eros that while not cruel in itself is congruent to the news reports of the suffering of others and must make its way into articulation burdened by its awareness.

Thus the bullets’ cagelike satellite surveillance round a world held in arrest. As *Under-World*, the title is also a play on one of the many fields that has arrested Eshleman’s attention over the past twenty years—the Up-

per Paleolithic origins of image-making, and its impact on the human psyche and the construction of personal and socio-political identity. This bifocal attention (the Freudian pistons of Eros and Thanatos pumping under our “civil” trunk) is a primary concern in *UWA* where imagination is both “the synthesis and the melee...the equatorial line stammering with the input of warring opposites.”

While Eshleman’s work has always confronted language-use within a world-context of oppression and violence, *UWA* seems to engage this on a more explicit level than, say, *Fracture*, *Hades in Manganese*, or *Hotel Cro-Magnon*. The imaginative, psychological and historical groundwork that these earlier collections cover is brought into focus within the political world climate of “arrest” under which the writing was done—the wars in Bosnia, El Salvador and Iraq, as well as the racial, economic, political and sexual warfare (domestic “unrest”) in North America:

Can’t get out of my embrace/the distance,
Dis stance,/hell pause between/an us, a
them, in which cruelty is neutralized.

UWA works against and into this distance (or “Dis stance,” a standing in hell), responding to its effects on not only our language but our psyche as well: our stance toward others’ suffering in which we are simultaneously in dis-stance and embrace.

The 13-page poem, “Cempasuchil,” is an example of this paradox of stance,

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Soul Strata

A VEIL IN THE SAND BY SUSAN SMITH NASH (ROOM PRESS, 1995)

Reviewed by Stephen Ellis

Persona: the characters of a novel, play, etc.,

Person: a particular individual: on spoken of indefinitely: the bodily form of a human being: the real self of a human being: any one of the three relations—the speaker, the one spoken to, and the one spoken of—underlying all discourse.

Underlying all discourse. Poetic praxii of the last twenty years have ‘opened’ the discourse system through which meaning comes to form; the resultant inquiry into definition enforced by language has splintered the sense of discourse-as-completion into fresh assemblages of language bits, parsed in ways that call former structures into question.

Susan Smith Nash’s recent book, *T.E. Lawrence: A Veil in the Sand*, is an extension of such inquiry into the realm of the person, and is consistent with much of her previous work, most notably, *Letters to Marilyn* (Texture Press) as well as innumerable reference to the likes of Edith Piaf, Hazlitt, Foucault and Mallarme in poems published in various little magazines. Voice here is confuted as Nash adopts (& adapts) that of T.E. Lawrence—as if his name were a temporal title for her working imagination—and is forged of her won concerns and emotions in combination with researched material on Lawrence, imagination itself being both binding force and

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Thousand Hands

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF TREES (TEXTURE PRESS, \$6)
EXUVIAE (SPECTACULAR DISEASES, \$2.50), BY JOHN PERLMAN.

Reviewed by David Giannini

There is a sense of trees more real than trees, a sense of all things more real than things, and this sense is—more often than not—poetry. In the hands of a poet as accomplished and longstanding (often looking at trees) as John Perlman, the poetry holds into a seamlessness of song, a lyric underpinning ranging from the primacy of the poet's perceptions (he *knows* many trees close and well) to what is past/present, of, around, and into the further reaches of, yes, the selected trees of this book: *Silver Maple*, *Mountain Magnolia*, *Bunchberry*—to name a few. The visual form of each poem is an occasion of space-counted lines: an equal number of letters and spacings per line—one at first expects of these suggested trunks: prosepoems. Look again. Listen. Although there are numerous details, various textures, exfoliations of adjectives, and virtually no punctuation, *all* elements feel necessary, *all* work toward the whole poem. Each line is branchlike *within* the iconographic trunk presented on the page. There is a sense of totemic possibility. Each line lifts then turns into the next line, moves simultaneously toward an edging out of meaning and toward more meaning than any line holds on its own. In *Sassafras* (*Sassafras albidum*) & *The Crest-Jewel Of Shankara* (one poem), italicized phrases from various historical-anecdotal texts mix with the poet's exact observations. The poem begins:

*the fool thinks I am the body sassafras
lifts up its thousand hands & testifies
to glory O fool stop identifying with a
lump of flesh softest salmonpink bright
vermilion yellow or blood orange leaves
on a blue october day a bundle of bones*

and so on down the page until the poem rounds out and harks back to its very beginning with these ending lines:

*dragged flailing to the deep & all alone
the sassafras uplifts its hands to glory
salmonpink vermilion & blood orange leaf*

Part of the magic of these poems occurs by juxtaposing historical wordings, private meditations, information carried through song to make on unfolding. Another poem, *Eastern Red Cedar*, has it this way:

*perfect wood for pencils poetry itself cruel
agent of the stripping of the eastern groves
light in fingers easily sharpened to a point*

The Natural History of Trees seems to contain its own review (overview) within the first four lines of *White Elm* (*Ulmus americana*):

*natural correspondence between moods of nature & the
human soul so an elm can scarcely attain seniority &
not gather as if felt beneath its shade associations
rich with persons who cannot altogether vanish...*

You can buy this book by writing to the Texture Press Chapbook Series' Editor Susan Smith Nash, 3760 Cedar Ridge Drive, Norman, Oklahoma, 73072.

A Measure of Necessity

ALL ACTS ARE SIMPLY ACTS BY
EDWARD FOSTER (RODENT PRESS,
1995)

Reviewed by Stephen Ellis

All Acts Are Simply Acts seems first, particularly romantic. Its emphasis is on the aesthetical and individual as opposed to the blatantly political, and though the book's first piece argues against utopian generalization vis-à-vis critical interpretation of poetry, there lingers throughout the book the tone of a utopian lament, maybe not for any particular utopia lost, but for loss itself, a kind of distributive utopian bliss, though this is also set upon by an ironic, though not unfeeling, intelligence, the product seeming occasionally close to a claustrophobic nostalgia, especially with reference to women, or a woman, whether particular or figurative or a combination of both, it is difficult to tell.

The book operates within a framework of interdependency; there is a careful balance as the various pieces achieve the level of narrativity (as opposed to argument); the perpetual flux of Foster's arrangement (poems alternated occasionally with prose, or 'prose-poems') gives space for a wide range of aptitude, including extremes of intense feeling, which are often negotiated in terms of relentless searchings-out of what language and history might be said to have *ghosted*. This no doubt relates to *woman* in the widest sense, as Foster's statement in the book's opening piece implies—"Criticism and critical theory try to take precedence over their subjects much as technology assumed precedence over nature." The sense of loss that pervades the book must perforce be in the scale of receivership—the degree to which one might be pieced,

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in each oracular utterance, not so much by what turns out to be the convenience of the predictive, but instead, the scripted evidences and gritty irritation of the instance itself, within the confines—linguistically—by which we'd previously identified it, formally, as an assimilated quality in the reification of identify, metaphorically, which there is thus no need to feel the weight and sharpness of, since we first and foremost recognize it as *our* object. Foster means to swap the immediacy of that assimilation for a trace back to a prior moment of confrontation: the immediate loss is one of eventual gain.

The problem is dealing with 'utopian generalization,' especially as it affects one's individual life. While it's true enough that, somatically, individuals have a need to feel they're part of an interconnected bond of commonality, it is also true that such commonality can be either preordained or dubbed in after the fact as objectified 'belief' as opposed to the more immediate feeling or sensation which the intellect can then transfigure via method into the necessary forms of sympathy—the necessary base of ethics. The rigid objectification of the perceptual stream into the static 'commonality' of obedience is a major theme here, yet that 'utopianism' is in part the gope that some sense of commonality might be achieved; to eliminate it might produce little more than the specificity of flotsam in the logoi, Joe Friday's "just the facts, ma'am." Foster's effort is, in part, to restore that stream's verity, as against the critical objectification of it, toward the end of hitching the somatic flow to poesis as utterance for the sake of a *primary* rather than a preliminary cognition of 'a life'—the release of finding each instant's 'unproof.' In "Poetry Has Nothing To Do With Politics," he argues the gnostic fluidity of the poetic text as against the fundamentalism of its interpretations, creation as against toxicity. The substance of a critical

rendering of a poetic text dresses its momentum in the cultural and distributive: 'first things' for everyone become pure product, the most blatant form of utopianism. The more actual throw of narrativity, as Foster quotes Bronk on Melville's *Pierre*, and Thoreau, is that "[n]othing is worth saying, nothing is worth doing except as a foil for the waves of silence to break against." As such, there is no prevalent valence to predetermine the instant of utterance other than those specific 'first blurts' themselves, which ultimately do sustain those self-same valences under the ardor of the current critique, again, the primacy of utterance, by which "waves of silence" (time?) are made to disclose themselves, as against the rhetorical and utopian love of ruins *already ruined*.

Such utterance and invocation, in Foster's work, is governed by an extreme severity; his rigor is in extending the grammar by which to 'know' a situation, only as far as feeling in that situation extends: ethics. Both his verse and his prose are tightly metrical, his accounting of fact, tactile and delicate as one evoking the fragrance of wine from old cork, the trace back (the return *here*) both cognitive and, applied to the present toward which arrival is set, bitter, medicinal and in the end, forgiving—but of what? There is a domestic uneasiness behind even those pieces ostensibly dealing with historical and cultural perspectives; in part, the book charts the break-up of a marriage, the 'reasons' for which are examined in terms similar to those with which 'utopian gen-

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- 6ix* vol.4, #1. Alicia Askenase, Julia Blumenrich, Valerie Fox, Rina Aerial #8 "The Barrett Watten Issue." Rod Smith, ed.
bloo #3. Andy Levy, et al, eds.
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Scalapino

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of linguistic apocalypse, which uses language so that it opens up into multiplicities of meanings or significations.

*I am currently interested in a form which is a version of the comic book (a written form using frames and without pictures). One element of it is to render itself / 'psyche' invalid—that it will use itself up as pulp and be regarded as nothing. It is not 'discursive,' 'analytical' 'method' — by in some ways reproducing such and not being that" (Scalapino *Poetics Journal* 56).*

For Scalapino, a convenient way of representing mentally-constructed, or apprehended, experience is to break it down into individual frames. In these frames, she unifies what she refers to as the "split between oneself and experience" so that the frames become ways of imagining oneself whole:

The novels portrayed a sense of the psyches of people, for example. The creation of a sense of private psyche was an expression of the split between oneself and experience (Scalapino *Poetics Journal* 56).

Scalapino suggests that the activities of reading and writing merge once one becomes self-conscious about the fact that the mind is constantly casting and recasting signification, "as imposing syntax, [which] is creating reality as imposition on or formation of one's thoughts and actions" (Scalapino, *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 30).

Scalapino emphasizes the mental process of making meaning and she explores tension between the world of ideas and the world of tangible, concrete objects. How does the artist, poet, or writer represent the process of bridging the gap between the object and the idea? What is involved in the process? In the essay, "Objects

in the Terrifying Tense Longing from Taking Place" from a collection of the same name, Scalapino creates a vivid scene of process:

*Thus the narration is not passive in that there are not images that are valid to the objectified surface (as the objectified/theorized surface is bogus). Also, some dissonant, not-romantic "beauty" occurs that is neither the inchoate or the theorized surface. It is "beauty" in the sense of phenomena, not conclusive (Scalapino *Objects* 51).*

How does poetic language create the condition of *mimesis*? What does it mean to create an imitation? Much of this issue revolves around the legacy of Horace's *Ars Poetica* (ca. 40 A.D.) and Aristotle's *Poetics*, which have been recycled and recast in a number of forms, including Sidney's *A Defense of Poetry*, Nicolas Boileau's *L'Arte Poetique*, John Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poetry*. One influential prescription of Horace's *Ars Poetica* was that art should follow the aesthetic values of the dominant culture, and the hegemonic imperative of a kind of order ("taste") that does not allow for dissenting voices.

Another issue addressed by Scalapino is this: How is art produced during a sense of an ending, in times of dissolution, crisis, and despair? How does one reconcile the act of making meaning with an awareness that the artifice of poetic art makes the old grammars and the old syntaxes suddenly irrelevant?

In the play, "Fin de Siecle, III" the words create an image of frenzy and chaos. She is describing the funeral of the Iranian ayatollah, Khomeini, but she could also be describing the effect of the sudden loss of order:

crowds of millions tearing at Khomeini's
corpse for scraps of the shroud
carrying it trampling screaming
trampled
swaying fealty

(Scalapino, *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 81)

The passage portrays a culture which is temporarily driven into a panic at the loss of their patriarch. The implication is that patriarchy is a contractual arrangement between the populace and the dictator, and that they value order and stability so much that they will give up their freedom for it. Yet, the consequences involve loss of social power and self-determination while the patriarch is alive, and mass confusion when he dies. From the patriarch's point of view, the poor or the powerless deserve their position in life because they are doing nothing to organize society. The patriarch fails to realize that they have actually given up a part of themselves to increase his strength, and he does not see the disorder that surrounds their lives. He lacks the ability to perceive beyond his fantasy of order and control.

The Return of Painting, the Pearl, and Orion is a trilogy of complementary narratives. In the narrative of *The Return of Painting*, or anti-novel, Scalapino continues what she has begun in her series of long poems, *Way*. There are similar characters, and they recur with the same regularity that they do in *Way*. A difference occurs in the style. *Way* is open, sometimes sparse, while *The Return of Painting* almost overwhelms the reader with an onslaught of quotidian, day-in-the-life kinds of data.

After reading *Way*, some of *The Return of Painting's* characters seem very familiar. For example, we see the same woman with a job waiting on guests at the table of a blind ninety-six year-old woman. This time, however, she is shopping to buy a paper. The narrative is an extended one. The reader can have insight into thoughts by means of an omniscient narrative, but the discourse is implied and indirect, a style reminiscent of Henry James in *The Golden Bowl*.

With the insight gained from reading Scalapino's notes on her writing, it is

possible to find definite “frames” within the narrative. There is not an obvious structure or connection between frames. They are linked together by the action of reading. Further, they are ordered and arranged by reading also. Because the action of reading created the order, and it is the process of ordering that Scalapino wishes to accentuate, it is not necessary to read the frames in the sequence of the book. Some of the major issues which recur in *The Return of Painting* involve the way the reader orders or arranges the frames, and how the ordering process affects the meaning. The meanings are multiple, Scalapino states again and again. The same multiplicity applies to identity, whether it be the identity of an individual or circumstance.

The second narrative of the trilogy, *The Pearl*, is more film-like than *The Return of Painting*. We seem to be watching scenes unfold before our eyes, and Scalapino subtly shades and rearranges images. There are people, cars, urban elements which shift quickly and give the overall impression of motion. Compared with *The Return of Painting*, there is little insight into the thoughts or feelings of the characters: “their view, so that one struggles ceaselessly to reverse and undo being — and then they define that backwards into being again” (Scalapino *The Return of Painting* 96).

Within the trilogy, the third section, *Orion*, makes the most innovative use of language. At first glance, the narrative form suggests a novel, but instead of possessing the linear plot of a traditional novel, the narrative line goes in many directions at the same time. The language is deliberately invented so that the syntax is disrupted enough to make the possible meanings and interpretations multiple and endless. Surprisingly, what results is a realism that persuades the reader of its verisimilitude because it corresponds to the experience or the feeling of being in the world. The fragmentary nature of the narrative cre-

ates an immediacy and nearness to the reader because it is disorienting and strange. Even the form contrasts with the novel — long lines, broken apart by shorter lines. There is cultural commentary mixed in with the narrative, which is reinforced by the open, relaxed structure.

She’s failed — there isn’t a relation between action and this; not cauterized, clear after it.

She lies in her apartment.
one is taught
when a

child which is immediately unbelievable to that child

At a time when many people were dying, I saw this
tiny tot running across the floor in an airport.

A little creature that had cropped up. And I thought

What’s the point? it’s just going to die.

(Scalapino *The Return of Painting* 169).

If Scalapino is to realistically represent the condition of the disenfranchised, she must somehow convey to the reader how it is that that person sees the world and orders perception. “Those who are without social power are less likely to see reality as orderly” (Scalapino *The Return of Painting* 153). Scalapino highlights the arbitrariness of language, particularly when she constructs the verbal equivalent of an Abstract Expressionist painting. Her words uncover the *Geist* lying beneath the surface in a similar manner as the paintings, whose explosions of pigment and blank canvas embody the act of the mind seeking symbols to identify, or the mind creating patterns of chaos.

A section in Scalapino’s *The Return of Painting, the Pearl, and Orion*, “The comic book,” suggests it is “simply a vision” and not part of the novel. In this section, one of the characters, “a sort of tight sweater version of Lana Turner unconscious spoiled”

travels through various places — sidewalk, port, driving a Chrysler, a restaurant, and in and around Oakland:

and relax — so
that it
just opens — and
completely relaxes

(Scalapino, *Return* 68)

This narrative occupies that boundary area where the two — the conscious and the unconscious, the concrete and the abstract, come together. Scalapino’s scenes are cinematic — long panning shots interspersed with quick cuts, jump-cuts, photomontage:

The cop with cigar in mouth legs planted apart sat in his office with his weight pushed forward — his stem out — and is the same as this (this.) Light — fragile. Wanting. The muscular fat in his cheeks worked. To be interpreting — first — ahead of it in order to have it (Scalapino *Return* 68).

In addition to the dark labyrinths of perception that the *film noir* genre and the hard-boiled detective genre evoke, Scalapino writes labyrinths of experience, mind, and culture. Through writing she shows how various icons of America function: a car is a screen upon which to project the desires that constitute a self; the port is an unslakeable urge to travel and transgress frontiers. Scalapino uses the American standard — violence — to explore how consciousness and flesh interact and how rage transfigures the body: “the steely-blue-eyed man with his throat cut and lying backward, the neck released” (Scalapino *Return* 74).

As in other works, Scalapino’s “The comic book” reinforces the notion of process — how the graphic novel’s techniques are deeply expressionistic and as such they represent reality — not on the level of photorealism or verisimilitude, but on a Kandinsky-tinged psychological level which investigates the nature of self and self-reification. Scalapino’s writing is the verbal equivalent of the superhero’s

“ZONK,” “CRACK-K-K-K-K,” or of pop artist Roy Lichtenstein’s self-conscious manipulations of how the comic book represents an ontological state and a culturally-determined identity.

Scalapino’s frames structurally parallel that of the comic book, and they have the same capacity to evoke extremes of perception, particularly one which thinks of itself as one in the shadows, where something is held in bold relief against its environment. Such epistemologies inform graphic novels that explore the labyrinths of the human mind. When Scalapino writes “the comic book is the self” (Scalapino *Return* 64), her words echo what it means for a self to be in transition, defined as much by what it is *not*, as by the dark, unknown (and unknowable) blocks of black pigment and dark, frightening, endless hallways, in and out of a maze which contains a minotaur we have constructed ourselves, just to remind ourselves of what it means to be safe, undevoured, unharmed, at least *so far*.

In *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff observes that many experimental writings take the stance that art has reached its limit — the only art (experimental art) left to do is of a type that simply reflects or restates the idea that art is exhausted, and there are no new avenues to follow. Fortunately, as Perloff points out, not all writers express this sentiment, and this is especially the case with Scalapino, and her writing. In reading Scalapino, one has the feeling that writing is being reinvented — this time as a constantly moving set of negotiations between reader and text.

Scalapino stresses the transition zone between states of being. Here, that boundary area is represented by the body. The human mind perceives the body as now adult, and alive, and simultaneously the mind projects that the body will eventually die and become a corpse. The corpse represents the process of dying. This is not necessarily the case, though. A corpse

does not have to represent the process of dying; it can merely represent death, and lifelessness. The corpse is simply a contrasting state of life.

There’s not meeting. There is not a relation between the adult and the corpse. between being that and dying. which isn’t till a ways off.

(Scalapino

Return of Painting 192).

The reader may begin to reconsider how and why an object becomes a symbol, and why it is so easy to see things in conventional ways. Unless writing awakens perception and rearranges thought patterns, it is difficult to see things except in their most conventional way. Scalapino emphasizes the importance of awakening perception to a new perspective: “Seeing that it is like seeing it from inside out, flat” (Scalapino *Return of Painting* 192). This is life as skewed language — perception turned inside out. The new perspective involves turning conventional notions of taste and aesthetic inside out as well. In response to the idea that her work is an exploration of “taste,” Scalapino writes that she wishes to “get at the world of ‘taste,’ bringing ‘taste’ (the norm, or perception itself) to its absolute limits of representation in order to entirely dislodge it. Bring content up close” (Scalapino “Letter” 1).

In *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold*, Scalapino explains how the frames work:

A recent work of mine in such a chameleon cartoon mode is a short “novel” titled THE PEARL. It is in the form of a comic book as writing. Each line or paragraph is a frame, so that each action occurs in the moment...The writing does not have actual pictures. It “functions” as does a comic book — in being read (Scalapino, *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 22).

Scalapino’s work should be read in frames in the same sense as a graphic novel — the mind must make the connections and fill in the gaps. An ex-

ample is her play, *Goya’s L.A.*, which contains seemingly unrelated photographs of Japanese wrestlers, coyotes, greyhounds. The juxtapositions ask the reader to confront the oppositions, represented as the subversive or deconstructive potential embodied in every entity or being. Like frames in a graphic novel, Scalapino’s frames suggest that meaning generation occurs when the work of art is able to represent or suggest in the reader’s mind a point in time that is the embodiment of an extreme. Time is compressed in the interest of finding the perfect moment to express immediacy and temporality:

Being inside each frame, is the present moment. But at the same time the writing (the frame) is really behind, in the rear of “what” is really occurring. The things are happening out ahead of the writing (Scalapino, *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* 22).

These extremes can be of action, or they can be of a state of being. Perhaps the most evocative of the extremes that the graphic novel represents is an extreme of symbolic logic — the frame explores the place where iconographic or semiotic meanings become dislodged from their conventional meanings and begin to indicate something else.

Objects in the Terrifying Tense Longing from Taking Place. This collection of reviews, essays, and an excerpt from *The Front Matter, Dead Souls*, focuses around the issue of how art can actually make consciousness. Her goal is to find how writing pertains to the “interior relation of experience” (Scalapino *Objects* 1). In other words, she is interested, among other things, in looking at how language (through writing or reading) orders the apprehension of experience.

Perhaps the most illuminating essay is one in which Scalapino analyzes how a reader reacts to the work of Robert Grenier. Grenier, whose recent poetry is written out long-hand in an often almost illegible scrawl, is

a poet of interest to Scalapino because the reading and interpreting of his work requires one to decipher it, decide the order in which to read it, and finally construct the poem's meaning. Like the printed graphic work of Cy Twombly, the poems of Robert Grenier contain printed words which are indiscernible, and therefore stripped of their meanings. In an essay on the graphics of Cy Twombly, Heiner Bastian takes the position that with his indecipherable writings, Twombly means to establish an art form that questions the relation between the sign (the words) and the process by which one makes meaning with signs. Bastian sees it as an appropriation:

The indiscernible writing allows an approach whose essence is just as abstract as, in itself, it represents an abstraction stripped from language. In place of the word that we apply as object again and again, we find in Twombly the immediacy of a figure of the psyche: the unutterable quality of the subject as choreography of appropriation (Bastian 18-19).

Although Bastian believes that the reader appropriates the illegible, or "the scrawl" as her or his own, the process could be one of projection. The reader projects her or his own consciousness onto the scrawl, and so is able to read what is, in essence, a mirror image of thought. In either case, what is occurring, in Scalapino's estimation, a construction of consciousness. The scrawl stands beside the mind, which is arranging ideas, signs, and impressions. Illegibility is an effacement of the sign, and the sign, once effaced, no longer organizes the mind, but lets it free to start rebuilding anew, "beginning again and again and again" (Stein 516).

Goya's L.A. In her introduction to *Goya's L.A.*, an avant-garde play, Leslie Scalapino explains the proper way to stage the work. No two performances will be the same. Instead of a tightly arranged presentation, with controlled set changes and clearly blocked stage directions,

Goya's L.A. creates an atmosphere that is spontaneous, almost improvisational. There may seem to be no order to the events — all order is in the eye of the beholder. Billboard-like signs move in and around the set, and moving images seem to float on screen. If one follows her directions, the performance of *Goya's L.A.* would be surreal, almost hallucinatory. The atmosphere is often Japanese, with series of slides of sumo wrestlers, Japanese characters (Dead Souls and Shadow-Akira), and samurai warriors. What is Japanese about the characters and the atmosphere is distorted and made unreal by American Southwest presences (coyotes), French surrealism (Cocteau's *Orphée*), and the persistence of death, decay, and transition.

However, *Goya's L.A.* is not simply about distortion or about testing the boundaries of what is real and what is not real. Scalapino wishes to draw the audience's attention to a "constructing of seeing" (Scalapino *Goya's L.A.* 5) that they themselves are engaged in. She does this, in part, by having successions of single visual events progress across the stage in a manner that establishes a certain tone:

The tone of *Goya's L.A.* is somewhat comparable with Romance comic books or the recent Chinese film, *The Killers*, which is only action, and, like the Romance comics, *stills* of the person seen separate (alone) in an 'immortalized', camp moment, that is, 'captured' from the side, sitting drinking a Scotch, for example; but where the person with whom the conversation is occurring then doesn't appear in the still: as if *that* person, who is only *another* character in the film or Romance comic, is the 'viewer' who later 'remembers' that loved person existing only in the still — a double nostalgia (and as if the heroic moment were in a gesture drinking scotch) — where neither ever existed (Scalapino *Goya's L.A.* 7).

As the words and the images collide with one another, each member of the audience will "see" the play differ-

ently. How the individual "sees" the play depends on how she or he orders the events. History is in the making as a series of unfoldings. The order that one person makes will be the opposite of what the other one makes.

The meaning of the visual images may depend on their sign value, or it may not. For example, the slide of a rotting coyote shown in Scene 2 may mean something entirely different to a person who looks at the slide at the same time she hears the lines spoken by Dead Souls, "the hull of the president's helicopter coming in the black night" (Scalapino *Goya's L.A.* 18). This viewer may consider that the play is making a commentary about the corruption of the world under the current political situation. However, another viewer may focus on the rotting coyote landscape an instant later, when it is collaged with lotuses. This viewer may interpret the scene as death and regeneration in the cycles of life. The interpretations are multiple, probably infinite. By the end of the play, the audience has the impression that the signification of all visual and verbal signs is always in question. Signs may have any number of potential meanings, and the identities of the characters are multiple and often masked. *Goya's L.A.*, like other Scalapino works, reveals and uncovers to the audience, certain relations of language to the mind of the audience. Her work is apocalyptic — it reveals, unveils, and, above all, disrupts generic expectations. Because the revelations deal with the very fabric of language, it is a linguistic apocalypse.

Leslie Scalapino's works are not easily categorized except as innovative, experimental works that cover a number of genres and forms. The fact that they are so diverse actually helps develop the unveiling and revelation in her work. What is revealed is the way that language works within literary works. In addition, her work explores and unveils the manner in which experimental literary productions represent the formation of consciousness.

The consciousness that is explored has to do with how meaning is both constructed and deconstructed in art. In addition, the social and cultural beliefs that contribute to the formation of meaning within a text are unveiled in Scalapino's work.

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Tensity

Continued from page 6

less than beside himself, as to how or whether the beloved will honor him—concerns perhaps brought on by the speaker's unexplained "bewailed

guilt." These concerns are formally resolved in the concluding couplet:

But do not so. I love thee in such sort
As, thou being mine, mine is thy good report.

Yet the resolution these lines formally announce—the rhetorical closure they seem to bring—sets up a subtle tension. For in no sense is the issue of the lover's absence or "otherness" resolved; & even the more mysterious anxieties of the sestet seem to have been "resolved" only in the most artificial (thus, unsatisfying) manner.

Obviously a poetry as richly associative & technically marvelous as Shakespeare's yields meaning refracted upon meaning—a splintering of resonance & association. Anyone looking for singular, unconflicted Meaning narrowly constructed & tightly bolted down ought not look to a poetry of the order of Shakespeare's, but rather to certain of his lesser successors—I am thinking for instance of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, or Wordsworth at his most pompous. Clearly, such a reader ought not look to Clark Coolidge, nor any of dozens of his contemporaries & recent predecessors for whom meaning is less a structural imperative than a fragmented & consistently changing whole—a play at the very core of language.

Tension signals the presence of the poetic—it is what distinguishes poetry from information-bearing language. The ability to see tension as a poetic value is directly related to the ability to see the poem not as a unidirectional conduit of meaning, but as a system of possibilities in which competing, even dissonant meanings will enact themselves, sometimes simultaneously, for different readers. This can be both a critical orientation, & a poetic one. Critical, in that it shifts focus from the poet's "intention" to the role of readers in the realization of a text. Poetic, in that it shifts value away from too-easily digestible poems, & toward poems that conspicuously set an array of potentials

in motion.

Thus, tensity can be viewed as a kind of negative capability within the poem. As such it expands the range of poetry, by making it possible to say more than one thing at the same time—which is, after all, one of the distinctions between poetic and information-bearing language. Tension is, to graft Pound's formulation onto Reverdy's, something like an intellectual & emotional complex in which two or more distant realities are juxtaposed. Though distant, the relationship between the realities must also be true, if the tension is to have resonance, or in other words to be effective within the poem. When that's the case, I'd argue tension's not an harmonic flaw impeding poem's unity, but a positive aesthetic value. Both reader & poet would do well to view tension as the precondition of an active, inquiring poetics, a poetics which isn't satisfied to imitate reality, but insists on playing a role in its construction.

An earlier version of this essay was presented as a talk at The Naropa Institute, July 3, 1991.

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Perlman

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The book is simply and cleanly formatted without any pretentious display, and it's #19 in what I take to be an ongoing series.

Exuviae was published within weeks of *The Natural History of Trees*, but the work in it is from an earlier—by about 12 years—period. That's not to suggest inferiority, but a placement along the poet's continuum. A continuance of assonance and dissonance owned fully. Music. A lyric minimalism that thinks beyond mere sparsity. A personal book. An anthology of the person as he touches—is touched by—a ridge, a James Brown performance, Chuang-tzu, and the woman he loves. It's easy to see how poems of this book prefigure *The Natural History of Trees*. My favorite poem in the book works to its last word with as good a balancing of personal-with-other knowledges and discoveries as one is likely to find. Here is the poem in its entirety:

SHUN ASKED CH'ENG
Rain Wind
the moon-eyed doll
falls
face-down
flute
at
breathlessness

Chuang-tzu
speaks of
coral mountains
pupils
with a teacher
picking mushrooms
under pines

Your posterity is not your own
(Air Voice Flesh)

Bone
cast
into
God

Exuviae

It is one poem, but as several making one, coalescing to make an answer to the question implied in the title. Those last five lines in some ways embody the whole. Do we become as dolls—lifeless—with the elements? Aboriginal flutes are bones “at/breathlessness.” Yes, those last five lines hit this reader, hard, and I want to explore them here a little. “Bone/cast” compresses to bone-cast, too. The old dog reverses, as usual, and becomes “God.” We cast bones at dogs, and dogs recast bones into themselves, get spoiled. Spoils, clothing, arms, hide: *exuviae*. But who—what—“cast”? I play to catch the conscience of the thing. The poem plays its music, plys its rain. The very playfulness of the lyric mushrooms, gently, into “*Your posterity is not your own*,” and that's the conscience at work here. I must believe that the poet uses those words (presumably translated from Chuang-tzu) because he knows they point to himself, with others: a world (or unworld). (Y)ours is not (y)ours.

Well, enough. Let the poem retrace its mysteries into wind. Rain. Believe me as I say John Perlman has never, to my knowledge, written a poor book. You can buy this one c/o Paul Green, 83(b) London Road, Peterborough, Cambs., PE2 9BS, England.

Let me end with what stands as a fine tribute to Perlman's friend, Frank Samperi, written before that poet's death.

FOR FRANK

an angel
leading camels
bearing water casks
into the wilderness

stops to question
cliffs the road
has come among

Veil

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locale, as the transforming energies of Nash's speculative action are

brought forth by their own combinatory heat across the imagined plains and deserts of Arabia.

T.E. Lawrence was an Englishman who fought with the arabs against the Turks in the war that eventually put an end to the Ottoman Empire (a war coterminous with W.W.I and the Russian Revolution). Lawrence was a minor figure in any practical, historical sense of the war, foregrounded, romantically, for his fanaticism, and more importantly, in the history of the imagination of martyrdom, as a hero.

As such, he presents the perfect figure for Nash's inventions, as much a Hollywood personae as Marilyn Monroe and therefore an ikon—a *wound* in yet also an *ideal of*, consensual consciousness. Nash does not attempt to locate an imagination of Lawrence within the confines of either historical or geological fact, rather, her hope seems to be to use conflation of voice as a reductive technique, so that by book's end, nobody and everybody (and anyone in between) is speaking. She does this by splitting the use of the first person *I* between her invention of Lawrence and the voice (of 'him') that can only be operative as her own.

The resulting multiplicity of voice makes the narrator other than any combination of Lawrence and Nash: the narrative itself is a cognitive process through which Nash is able to gain access to material via research on Lawrence that would otherwise remain out of reach, thus the title, *A Veil in the Sand*, is literal, that is, Nash's cognitive act *is* that veil, behind which we find neither Lawrence nor Arabia, but the ikon of Nash herself. But to what purpose, this?

The imperialism of the British during the time of Lawrence's operations in Arabia are well know. Nash may be playing upon this theme in the guise of (under the veil of?) the person, i.e., what is personance, what assumptions and beliefs string persons along, as why did Lawrence go to Arabia, what

business had he there—i.e., to what extent was it possible for him to be (and be seen as) sympathetic to the arab cause, not out of imperialistic reasons, but out of genuine belief? Given his cultural upbringing, was such belief even possible?

A previous draft of these notes contains this paragraph—

It is with this endless sense of surface (the facts of Lawrence, of landscape, of language) that Nash attempts to deal; her sounding of depth is accomplished to some degree by the intertwining of terms from several sources at once. Such simultaneity locates person as resonance, and makes the confutation of voice—hers and/or 'his'—operative to the extent it escapes monotony (the drone of history accomplished) and reveals—temporarily—as registration—a mind at work to overcome the designations to which we—cognitively—so often seem (self-)appointed.

The element of 'interiority' Nash captures in her narrative is ultimately her own, and this is both the ground and occasion of this work; in some sense, her 'occupation' of Lawrence's 'territory' is an imperialist act she attempts to transform into identity as shifts within a particular ground—her soul, as it were. However, the true facts of both Lawrence and the Arabian territories can no more be subsumed into narrative, than Lawrence could be seen as the arabist he claimed to be. Given this, the true 'topic' of Nash's narrative is the tension between the objective and subjective, the distance that cognizance is unable to realize in any terms but its own contradictory belief that one is where one is, despite the weight of evidence or necessity otherwise.

In this, the work has alchemical elements: desire as ever-forward thrust, through the crust of personae, a transformative (babbling) fluency, magical truancy in discourse, toward recovery of the triadic sense of the person as who speaks, who is spoken to, and who is spoken of. Although the body of the person is a confluence of all three, the speaker has always been the

figure of power, imparting information *about*, and *to*. Nash's attempt is to disfigure that power by making the narrative a bodily form of all three, such that 'her' voice speaks to him, his of her, him through her, to us, etc. The value of such multi-voicing is in its reduction of the polarities of subject and object, which are anyway results of our discourse system, and in showing forth the underparts—the interlinking and interlocking—of the relational elements defining person as alternately powerful or powerless, underlying discourse itself. The paradigm of the martyr works neatly enough here, as how does one know, in that instance, who believe what is being given (up) for whom, to what purpose, and in whose view? Nash attempts to enter (whilst entertaining) the many facets of this narrative problem: I don't know that she's accomplished a practical solution (her narrator, after all, is still The Speaker, and does have the (ad)vantage of that primacy). However, the way she has gathered conflictive voices into patterns that essentially are multiple without being ultimately dispersive, does point toward a practice in which voicings arranged in narrative may take on apposite positions, and hold them to the end of clarity, rather than confusion.

Foster

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eralization' was criticized. To bring up two terms mentioned earlier in these notes, "prior moment of confrontation" and 'ruins already ruined,' in terms of a 'break-up' (analogously, too, a break-up of form into other forms—again, that sense of *utterance*), the trace Foster follows is the one leading back to here, wherever that is, however found and in whatever terms, the book not only a painful testament of resolve—turning the formerly 'objectified figure' of the woman into the subjectivity of feel-

ing and loss—but equally an attempt to transform materials *given* into a recognizable form of *how to continue*—the process itself, wave after wave of inter-related utterance through which critical awareness is able to *add*, rather than detractively 'explain.' So the loss of the woman is not the loss of *relation*—it is the loss of *retention*, which then is sounded—the very antitheses of utopia (communal recidivism: enforced security, as the critical resolve toward the stability of history)—and thereby a recovery or gain of one's own 'history' by inflection—the tongue busied by the fact of its *own* valance. The woman, muse perhaps as she might have been, is inverted to an order in which her absence becomes the presence of a cognitive order of forgiveness; she occupies the status of an icon—a silent reverie—(and one in which Foster confesses he has trouble inactively believing) in which each utterance at her loss is a reconstruction of another time—"then"—*now*. The 'person' of this—Foster's narrative—is thus put in receivership of exactly what is narrated, the 'time' of the cognitive act set in motion as the feeling of one's *own* life—not as reification, but as methodology in full sail, the trail and trial, home.

To this end—and to close out my remarks—the last few paragraphs of "The Marriage Of True Minds"—the last piece in the book—are telling:

The shore does nothing for the sand; nothings living there. We watch it with the intricate release we get from books and tell ourselves that sailors are allowed what we can never see. And yet the boys wait silently behind the silver glass. Who's shattered now?

And this: not desiring what you most desire, you wash the walls, erase the images of rancor, spleen. But when they're bleached, then memory's a mirror, and mirrors without malice, angels say, are bliss.

So humor rises, becomes methodical with age, wise than the minotaur I followed with your hands. The filaments of sunny afternoons could find you now, but you,

at least the you I used to know, are locked in marble lands. I leave this room and find the blood is running through the sand. It is the god who takes us through the dead, and lets me kiss each face and find time measured everywhere.

Who's to blame? I sometimes wish to feel the final ashes of your hair, but as it is, in my New England way, I place these lips in stone, and, bargaining with mirrors for their skin, I reconstruct your ecstasy, alone.

Eshleman

Continued from page 7

working primarily from the "Day of the Dead" *ofrendas* (altarlike offerings to the familial dead in Mexican culture). "Cempasuchil" (a flower akin to our yellow-orange chrysanthemums whose petals are scattered between graveyards and *ofrendas*, and which the dead follow) is a kind of language altar and altering of language wherein the offering's contraforce is the taking of colonialism. The *ofrenda* is extended to include historical and cultural specters: "If I ask who are my dead?/Christobal Colon appears,/a vast scorpion/whose back is littered with/70 million corpses..."

"Cempasuchil"'s meandering language assembles itself like offerings to the dead that both are and are not eaten—a sort of autophagic metabolism of self-generative language, neologisms, puns, temporal and spatial jump-cuts that turn back on the poem while simultaneously moving it forward: "Is this what it feels like to be dead?/Whitman's glove comes off revealing/no word is foreign, call me Abner./go such a snake,/as if between each word/a broken tightrope, the walker slowly/curling in space,/maggot boy, bagworm, sending a thread/into Hell,/and watch the damned ascend, thread/loaded with Theresa and Flip Phillips./American quilt, as Sousa passes/through, Bach pounds/on his lemonade stand. Fuck you and/your formal design./Columbus, I refuse to inherit your meter,/as well

as your meter maids."

An interesting comparison exists between "Cempasuchil" and "Guyton Place"—a poem written after Eshleman's visits to the Heidelberg Project in which abandoned houses in Detroit were impasto'd with "trash" found on the streets and arranged by artist Tyree Guyton. "Guyton Place" is a kind of North-of-the-boarder, inner-city *ofrenda*, an ironic altar to consumer fetishism of commodities minus the concept "eternity": a language heaped and steeped, like the houses themselves, in staggering enjambments: "Imagine 'Blue Poles' tied around a house so staggered it can barely sustain structure, / 'drippings' 1 to 5 layers deep, no longer 'paint' / but a rubble ropology of bedsprings nailed over window, / jammed in crutches, one with LA Gear basketball shoe / porkpie hat forced into white telephone receiver, / grey underpants, / tricycle poked window, brooms through springs//fireman boot snaking eaves gutter."

"Guyton Place" stands as a kind of Eden doppelganger, an inverted house/language/world in which *arrest* is to be (like "Whitman's glove") both riveted to and exiled from the commodities and language that we have created and used, and yet persist beyond our involvement with them: a babble "in Babel on earth's mulifoliate / cross."

UWA is also a coming-out for Horrah Pornoff—Eshleman's gender-other persona whose work has appeared in several small-press magazines since her "conception" in the early-70s. Pornoff's long poem, "Homuncula," as Eshleman states, was reworked after reading Paglia's *Sexual Personae* whereby the work of personae is a fascination with "expressing what we are not as a aspect of what we are..."

As with this project of going outside of what one identifies oneself with, it is Eshleman's willingness to let language surround him, use him as he uses it, that allows these poems to go

beyond the re-assertion, in language, of what one already knows toward a deepening "stance toward reality." From "Under World Arrest": "With a bite, the apple eater is surrounded. / Is this one sprayed? Near Eve's teeth marks, // the poison is most intense. / So Original Sin flares in any act, / in the act of the mind / world arrest asserts itself."

This grafting of supermarket and mythological apples is at the core of *UWA* whereby imagination (unlike ego) does not surround reality, but rather is surrounded by the teeth marks of daily news, bullet shells around the next corner, around a world-house in which "There is no place that does not see you."

Publications

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- W.B. Keckler: *Ants Dissolve in Moonlight* (Fugue State Press), 1995.
Duncan McNaughton: 3 Poems, OASII Broadside Series #4, 1994.
Sheila E. Murphy: *A Clove of Gender* (Stride Press), 1995.
Michael Palmer: *Idem* (trns. into French by Oscarine Bosquet) Un bureau sur atlantique, 1995. Note: Idem is an excerpt from First Figure, north Point Press, 1984.
Michael Palmer: *At Passages* (New Directions), 1995.
Jim Regan: *Castle King-Four* (Fithian Press) 1995.
Jerome Rothenberg: *An Oracle for Delphi*. Light and Dust Books, 1994.
Claude Royet-Journoud: *A Descriptive Method* (The Post-Apollo Press) 1995.
Mark Salerno: *Hate*. 96 Tears Press, 1995.
Kenneth Sherwood: *Hard [HRt] Return*. RIF/T, 1995.
Chris Stroffolino: *Cusps* (edge books) 1995.
Cole Swensen: *Numen* (Burning Deck), 1995.
Lewis Warsh: *Avenue of Escape* (Long News Press), 1995.
Elizabeth Willis: *The Human Abstract* (Penguin) 1995.
Daniel Zimmerman: 3 Poems. OASII Broadside Series #1, 1994.

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