

considering how exaggerated music is

Leslie Scalapino, *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is.*
North Point Press. San Francisco, 1982.
138 pages. Paper \$9.50.



I received copies of Leslie Scalapino's earlier books, *Instead of an Animal* and *This Eating and Walking at the Same Time is Associated All Right*, a couple of years ago and kept them around on my desk not being able to shelve them away because the writing was very attractive and I kept reading them from time to time. And then I saw a copy of her latest book, *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is*, which is a collection of the other books plus some new stuff, and I had to have a copy of it. So I wrote to her saying I would do this review if she sent me a copy of her book. Now I've had the book for a few months and I find I want to have it around, I want to read it often.

Scalapino is currently a San Francisco writer associated with the New College of California's Poetics programme. Her writing is very biographical and I gather trauma has been upper-middle-class American growing up in the 60's and 70's mostly in the southwest and California but travelling "extensively throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe." Much of her content is about her sex life and relational and perceptual hangups. But the impact of her writing is her sensibility toward the world and particularly toward language.

She tries to write partly the way someone would talk but also the way someone would think so the writing is like a record of the actual occurrence (and concurrence) of language and thinking where the syntax isn't formal and preset but natural. This is striking on the page where it comes out as prose-poem. For example:

Seeing as I was willing to give up my seat for the person who said he had reserved it, first wetting out of my excitement or my worry or perhaps heat, not only the seat but obviously my own clothes, it is no wonder that the person was willing to sit wallowing in it; in that perfumes are made to come from the anal glands of animals.

The syntax moves very quickly so that the sweep of thinking and saying is amazingly particular. She is able to focus on words and thoughts as particles in motion; we don't stop at any point with some glib comprehension but keep adding up, figuring out.

This kind of intense attention to movement in language results in a voice which is going at least two directions at the same time. Meaning and intention always seem to provide an axis. In the series of poems "This Eating and Walking at the Same Time is Associated All Right" Scalapino generates the bidirectional serially as well as within the syntax of each segment. The "sultry" pre-hurricane weather is a thread in the initial pieces.

Unemployed though when I heard someone who used an obscene word the other day
he didn't look as if he were in another world
and so I'm worried
especially in this sultry weather.

Then the "unemployed" gets picked up as a thread:

I was unemployed and the social hierarchy operates even after we've died
so I've
been more excited
wanted sex regularly.

Then the "social hierarchy" and the "sex" get picked up as extending threads. The whole sequence is a wonderful illustration of the revolutionary aspect of the larger uses of paradigmatic thought-suffixes; large chunks of mind-rhyme generating further and further prehension.

There is a strong narrative tendency in Scalapino's writing so the predominance of non-linear prose-poem in this collection is understandable. Each section, or each book, takes on a slightly different challenge of form. The last two sections of the book, "In Sequence" and "Considering How Exaggerated Music Is," are occupied with past tense (memory) and the nuances of voice used to lever the images. Present-past,

I sit in the car in a parking lot of a market, hold up a bottle of wine for a sip, two old men sitting in the front of a car facing me — they each take drinks out of cartons of milk with their chins up as they drink the milk. I like music playing on the radio in the car and a friend comes out of the market.

We go back, get into bed, come — I'm entirely concentrated on this — I think everything is the country.

mixed past,

It was easy to embarrass people when he didn't have a job or an income. It is easy to mock an unrelated or individual event even if one considers any expression to be sexually connected

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and other aspects of past as well. This is engaging writing because underneath the steady storytelling the perceptions are constantly shifting, hologrammatically, if that makes any sense.

Scalapino's writing is attractive because it puts the mind back in the body.

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