

First, a personal note, that Scalapino's work liberated and challenged me — this is not unique — and that I deeply wish I had heard her, met her, studied with her... In particular, Scalapino presented a poetics — both implicitly in her work, and explicitly in some of her theoretical writings — which at least in part pointed to certain ancient Buddhist writers/teachers as providing a frame of reference/terms which applied to much of what many people are doing, with or without connections to Buddhism, a language, as it were, in which things that might seem forced in the usual critical context suddenly become natural, almost inevitable. This note is pointing towards that other context, in particular, to the usefulness of Nagarjuna. Dogen is also useful, but someone else needs to point to that.

I begin with a semi-random quote which is eloquent and accurate about what Scalapino is doing, but in which the roots of this other context are missed.

“Simultaneity is at the core of this book. It is a collage, but a very dynamic collage that feels harnessed to a team of very powerful horses. Consciousness rides each sentence with a handful of mane and the frenzy of unbridled energies. Each pulse of existence achieves its fullest expression as a part of the overall synthesis of creation, but without a concomitant incongruity, synthesis turns stale. We don't know we're moving if we don't move against something. Hills, fences, mailboxes, doors. Simultaneity means everything happening at once which is what life is. All things are interrelated. There is propinquity between a milkweed and a swordfish. "But," observes Whitehead, "though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level.”

(From John Olson's review of *Floats Horse-Floats or Horse-Flows*, a novel by Leslie Scalapino, Starcherone Books, 2010, on <http://tillalala.blogspot.com/2010/06/adventures-in-aphasia.html>)

Olson goes on to see this simultaneity (an oft-noted core of much of Scalapino's work) as rooted in cubism. I would go back much further, to

Nagarjuna, a great Indian Buddhist monk and philosopher of the first century C.E. Scalapino herself focuses on Nagarjuna in her essay *The Recovery of the Public World*, collected in *The Public World/Syntactically Impermanence*, an essay so rich and suggestive that anyone reading this here right now would be well advised to read it instead. Or to read Nagarjuna (if you're intrepid enough to do that, try Jay Garfield's translation of the *Mulamadhyamakkarika*, titled in English *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*). The purpose of this short note is not just simply to point to Nagarjuna's acknowledged influence on Scalapino, but to point to what she pointed to, which is that much of what we consider avant-garde or revolutionary or exploratory or whatever poetics in fact is anticipated by his work.

In short summary (mine):

The importance of grammar — not correct grammar, but attention to it, the way grammar distorts the mind. Implicitly or explicitly questioning the distinction between noun and verb, distinction between subject and object — who acts? what action? No completed states, only incompleting ones — events are never complete. Thus calling into question one of the most fundamental substrates of language.

No self. Not just no unified self, but no self, period. Don't look for it. You won't find it. Notions of real and not real are useless. Something is there. It is not some thing. The poet is not *located* anywhere. She speaks, with great particularity, but from no particular place.

The Cliff's Notes version of Nagarjuna's concept of self is co-dependent origination (a standard trope in Mahayana Buddhism), but if you see the same thing without the Cliff's Notes summarization it becomes perception rather than formula, validating juxtaposition, neologism, mashing words together, exposing the superfluity of standard modes of exposition and the falsity of the obvious.

As for time, yes, it too is, like everything else, inherently dependent on everything else. Past, present, future are dependent on each other. "... [T]he only mode of existence that time has is as a set of relations among empirical phenomena" (Garfield's commentary in Nagarjuna/Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 257): i.e., flattening, simultaneity. Things are suspended *and* everything happens at once.

And, while on the level of the sentence Nagarjuna is, like Wittgenstein, famously lucid, there is an obsessive focus through repetition and minor variation on simple situations which take on a kind of numinous universality, the repetition of words and phrases almost as in a pantoum or sestina, small shifts, a build-up of particulars (abstraction itself becoming particular), a fluid structure which never locks into place. Who am I describing here? Exactly the point.

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[Judith Roitman's](#) book *No Face: Selected and New Poems* was published in 2008 by First Intensity Press.