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“One night, running after her thru the park”, the man said to me  
(and he kept using the word “her”, tho he was actually referring to me)  
, “I found, that the deeper I followed her into the park  
(aware, having just left my bed, — after finding that she had left me, —  
and gone out looking for her, that the passers-by had begun to stare,  
since I was calling her name) ; far from seeming  
to lose contact with my bed in my room, I was like a water lily”,  
he said, (smiling at me), “or a lotus, with a stem attached deep in  
the bed of a lake. Meanwhile, I was running (altho it seemed like  
floating) with my head thrown back, and calling out very loudly LESLIE”.

from “hmmmm”

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I’m not sure whether it was only for the sake of helping me with my writing – and not in hopes of a few laughs at my ineptitude and priggishness – that my poetry professor assigned me Leslie Scalapino’s *Considering how exaggerated music is* for my first graduate seminar presentation. My preliminary examination of the book did strike fear in my heart. As a somewhat shy and overly polite twenty-two-year-old from the South, the idea of reading aloud poems that included lines describing “perfumes...from the anal glands of animals” was in direct conflict with my standards of gentility. And during my first read, I was deeply confused by the book. After studying in a highly regarded but rather conservative English department as an undergraduate, I was well-prepared for the challenges of what I thought of as difficult work—the high modernism of Eliot’s “The Waste Land” or Joyce’s “Ulysses”—but this was something different. Try as I might, I could not find the allusions that ought to illuminate difficult passages and was unable to unlock the symbols that I hoped would elucidate the book’s meaning. Everything that I thought I knew about how poetry was supposed to work was insufficient. Despite reading the book twenty-one years after its initial publication, I had never encountered anything like it. Even my theory-obsessed PhD-track friends gave me their full sympathies upon reading a few stanzas—this was going to be a difficult assignment.

But after a few thorough readings of the book, I became absorbed into the world of the poems. The loss of the fixed subject, which had terrified me on my first reading, now seemed exciting. The “I” of the book was an aggregate of action and impulse, as opposed to a neatly coherent self. I saw a world of possibilities—shifting subject positions, language, bodies. The rhythms and alterations of phrases helped me to work my way into the piece on a bodily level. This wasn’t poetry to be considered, decoded and set aside.

Instead of being frustrated by my inability to come to a pat conclusion about the work, I found myself liberated. Scalapino's work entered into my consciousness and changed my view of what is possible for poetry. Reading her work as a young woman gave me permission to be challenging, difficult, unafraid to overreach – Leslie Scalapino and her work still provide a model for me now.

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