

“Messing Up Linear Time”: Excerpts from a Conversation with Leslie Scalapino

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Sarah Rosenthal writes:

I interviewed Leslie in her living room in Oakland. When I arrived at her home, I was having some neck pain. Knowing that she had a chronic neck issue and would understand, I explained that I needed to do some yoga poses before turning on the mic, and proceeded to do a downward dog on her carpet. She got a big kick out of this and said she needed to do some neck exercises of her own. She served me tea in the dining room (the table a mountain of books and papers--the sort of library-in-progress you'd expect from a busy writer, teacher, and publisher) and helped me parse the imagery in a gorgeous, elaborate Tibetan Buddhist tapestry that hung on her wall before we settled down for our talk.

The following excerpts of that discussion cover a range of topics--from a reading Leslie attended in New York, to her writing process. However, the through line is Leslie's interest in writing as an act of attention, and her desire to perceive the true nature of phenomena. She points out that we typically place frames around our perceptions in order to understand them and argues that this framing alters what we perceive. She explains her interest in removing such perceptual boundaries in order to observe reality, noting however that this removal of boundaries also changes the nature of things. She reveals

the intense emotional toll that this stripping away of perceptual frames takes on her but makes clear that she sees this approach as fundamental to her nature.

Sarah Rosenthal: I'd like to start with two quotes by other writers that appear in your work. One, the epigraph of *Way*, is from David Bohm's *Causality & Chance in Modern Physics*. The second, which appears in a passage in *R-hu* where you are discussing Philip Whalen's work, is from José Ignacio Cabezón's *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*.¹ Both are about the nature of objects in the world; they get at the idea that all objects are interconnected in a giant web and that they're defined by each other. So there is no stability to any entity—to any person or thing.

Leslie Scalapino: Also, one thing that fascinated me about this thought was that behavior and emotions are also objects, they're things (events). They're all active at once, and nothing is the same thing as itself because it doesn't even have an instant in which it *is*, in a stable way.

SR: One of those quotes describes everything as being in a state of free fall. The other quote describes a constant flux, where there's no stability of any identity, even with itself, from one moment to the next.

LS: In the case of the second quote you mentioned, Charles Bernstein had made an observation which sparked my writing of that particular passage. There was a group reading of Philip Whalen's work in New York, and many of the people reading had never heard him read. Some of them were young poets, and they were grappling with how to read it, because they wanted it to be almost as if there were one way to read it, which would be Philip's voice. But they had never heard his voice. So as they were speaking, they were trying to find out what this is. Bernstein remarked afterward how fascinating it was to watch people doing that, because Philip was doing something that was incredibly difficult to do, which was not even relying on resonance, or a sound pattern, or returning to anything, but it's just this free fall where there *could* possibly be inertia, or there could be anything. It would be whatever would occur, and you would be seeing what is. And that's really mind as phenomena, and sound as phenomena, and something very dangerous to do as writing. He didn't say that, but that's what I think. I realized that was something that I wanted to do—that you don't encapsulate or make endings to things, have ways to take care of it so that it can't allow that free fall.

SR: Your earlier works appear much more contained to me than your later works. For example, in your book *way* there are delineated topics as well as a clear movement between lined poems and prose paragraphs. I experience your more recent work as enacting a more chaotic state. It feels faster, and seems to collapse boundaries more easily. There's a passage in *Defoe* where you write, "This gets so limpid that there's no reason to go on and then one can see really what occurs."² In *Defoe* I sense a radical

giving up that's similar to what you're saying about Philip Whalen's work: a risk of not containing it in any way, of letting there be a kind of free fall.

LS: There are many interesting problems and thoughts in connection with this. For one thing, a question of prose or poetry. *way* has line breaks. I don't know whether you're saying it *looks* contained, or it *is* contained. The question would be, In what way? It was not at the time emotionally contained for me; that is, it was undertaking something that was very hard on me. Wrestling with such *might* constitute a change conceptually that's an invention, as much or more than a work derived from a cerebral approach. *way* is a sound pattern: Something occurs that is its sound and shape. The notion is that one would apprehend in the reading, whether it's read out loud or not, something that takes place as that sound and shape, which is an event. So it's not contained in terms of what the event is, perhaps. It may be an arduous event; it may even really hit the fan. But the point is, *way* is a potentially infinite space in which all events and relations, past and future even, can both be on a single space—conceptually, as text's abstraction—and at once be utterly changed there.

Defoe is a prose work. The quote that you are referring to is exactly what I was undergoing and engaging in that work, where there's free fall not only as writing but in terms of phenomena and how one's seeing the world. There aren't any boundaries in terms of a feeling of being safe knowing what it is that's happening, or imposing limits on one's seeing of something so that one can make sense out of it. I was dropping that, aware that I was trying to drop that. It was very enervating. Especially since some of the

engagement was our being in the midst of war, the Gulf War, which was completely invasive. Context is where the inside and outside are completely imploded.

SR: So do you feel that that book was a visceral response to the violence of the Gulf War?

LS: It was partly that, but it didn't have that boundary either. The writing was taking in various events or strands at the same time. The Gulf War was one; I began *Defoe* during the buildup to the Gulf War. It was as if everything was being hurled into the same state and was appearing to be the same thing. A paragraph might read as unfolding of emotion of rage, which read appears identical to motionless calm. I referred in *Defoe* to the Oakland fire, for example, which came to within a block of our house. No one on this block left the area; they were watering down their roofs, cars exploding on the background, an inferno wind. It was as if the war had come to us. One drops any distinctions about things because one's trying to see what one thing is. When the boundaries are dropped, you begin to see the nature of phenomena, but also that the passage across the boundaries transforms those phenomena.

SR: It could make you wonder if you are crazy, I would think, or if you can handle it. If you can have the mental stamina to stay with all of that bleeding of phenomena so that you really are experiencing everything as one related morass.

LS: Well, the paragraphs in *Defoe* are paragraphs of attention, where a number of events, emotions, and sights will conflate in one paragraph. But I wanted to hold onto these, which were jumping ahead of themselves, not exclude anything and have attention at the same time. I wanted the writing to be itself attention, with all of the impinging of these events (historical, outside, not separate from any impression and emotion), so that the writer wouldn't forcibly exclude anything, and the reader would let it come in, but the writing would also be very clear and attentive to it so it wouldn't be crazy-making.

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SR: How do you know when you're done with a book?

LS: I go on for a while because I'm really connected to an investigation. There's some kind of interior unknown space or occurrence that finally materializes via one's putting things together, and I learn something.

SR: Is "putting things together" a good way to describe it, or could it just as easily be described as paying attention and seeing what arises?

LS: I wrote a poem recently where I was actually thinking about the quality that some people have of deciding to place things together. I was thinking how someone could, with a kind of humane rationalism, simply put one thing next to another thing and let it be there and see something about it, as opposed to my own tendency which is to have things

really hit the fan, where you get really messed up by this, embroiled in it emotionally—or I do, as the writer or the person thinking about this. And I can't see the forest for the trees. Yet rationalism is a construct which is *also* illusion.

SR: Do you mean you let too many things in and you'd like to be a little more deliberate?

LS: No, I mean I'm not distanced from it and it may hurt or be just incredibly confusing and upsetting. So then, when that has become a morass that has a big effect on me, at some point I begin to see what it is. I was commenting humorously in this poem about the fact that some people could just simply place things together and let that be. But in parentheses I said, "'Simply' only if you *can* do it." So it's a different method than mine, and probably requires a different personality.

SR: One that can simplify a problem and distance oneself.

LS: Right, though it is that very distancing, I think, that enables you to put frames around events perceived so that you actually change them totally as linear thinking, convention. This goes back to what we were talking about earlier, how free fall involves letting go of the frames that one would put around perception which would supply or preserve artificial borders.

SR: So you're saying you can appreciate that approach but it's not your way because it's too simple.

LS: Or it would change reality. But on the other hand, by taking away those conventional frames you're changing reality also. So you're between these two views, and you have to see both views and ask if there's something outside the framing devices. The mind's framing being the text's phenomena.

Notes:

¹ Scalapino, *R-hu*, 120.

² Scalapino, *Defoe*, 293.

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----- *R-hu*. Berkeley: Atelos, 2000.

----- *Way*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988.

[Sarah Rosenthal](#) is the author of [Manhattan](#) (Spuyten Duyvil 2009). The tribute editors are grateful to Sarah Rosenthal and [Dalkey Archive Press](#) for permission to excerpt this interview, which originally appeared in [A Community Writing Itself: Conversations with Vanguard Writers of the Bay Area](#), edited by Sarah Rosenthal.