

Remembering (Reading) Leslie Scalapino: Selected Letters

It was a privilege (and my good fortune) to know Leslie Scalapino as a friend. Though we didn't actually meet there, we both went up to Reed College -- she graduated in the spring of 1966 and I arrived that same fall, staying for a year and a half before transferring to UC Berkeley in the spring of 1968, where again we didn't meet, though she was also there at that time (she got an MA in English in 1969). I can't recall exactly when it was that we did finally meet (it must have been at one of her readings) but we must have been friends by the middle eighties, when she and Tom came to Bolinas for a lunch with Ashley and me, after which the following correspondence begins. My copy of Considering how exaggerated/ music is (1982) is inscribed in that lovely (and now to be forever missed) felt-tipped-pen-handwriting slanting to the right, "For Stephen/ Leslie Scalapino." And in this first of her letters (at least the first I can find, its hand addressed envelope now lost alas) she is working on Robert Grenier's Phantom Anthems (the first O Book), telling me she can't take on the manuscript I had given her (then called Random House) because, as she says, she "was going to do only the one, but now may do two others which are already designated." (In just a few years, that first of her O Books had turned into many, and she was "committed now to eight (!) more in the next year and a half.") Encouraged by her commitment, I published that manuscript - now called Distance, in order to avoid any 'trademark' issue with Random House (the company) - as the first Avenue B book, with others to follow (at not nearly the same pace as Leslie continued doing O Books!), including Talking in Tranquility: Interviews with Ted Berrigan, which we published together as an Avenue B / O Books book in 1991. There were many occasions over the years since then, where we saw each other and got to talk: afternoon coffee either at her house on Clover Drive or Oliveto's café, down on College where we'd walk; also dinners at her house with Tom, on my way back to Bolinas after the day at Mills; another more recent dinner out here at the Olema Inn two nights before my son Johnny was born; and after that an afternoon tea here with Tom and her father (all of them having come out to the Bolinas Cemetery to visit her mother's grave, where she too will now be laid to rest); and other visits out here with Chaka, their dog, who was that first time scared of little Johnny (someone just her own size) and, another time, went on a late afternoon winter walk with us across the windblown cliffs out at RCA; and, finally, Monday nights at her house on Presley Way this last spring where I would visit after my day at Mills, and she was battling the demons that eventually would consume her, and all three of us would talk and laugh and cook and eat dinner, these last times now seemingly most precious. . . .

The first four letters which follow are typed (handwritten signature); the next three are handwritten; all but one of the following ones were email [with their dates in brackets]. My letters to her will give the context for what she wrote in her following letter, our correspondence being a part of what now appears as part of our ongoing 'conversation' -- which now, sadly, has stopped. . . .

Stephen Ratcliffe
Bolinas, California
August 1, 2010

2/3/1986
5729 Clover Dr.

Dear Stephen

Thanks very much for your letter. Also I enjoyed having lunch with you and Ashley coming out to see you. It was very pleasant; the plum blossoms are still blooming in two vases.

I'm driving tomorrow to San Diego, where I'll read at the university; then spend a week in Los Angeles. Have just been finishing various work today, looking out the window at the rain and hail. In regard to publishing Random House: I know, as we were saying, it's so difficult to find a good publishing situation now. I'm sorry that I can't do the book. I have in mind a very brief publishing project; partly because of funds, but also I don't want to undertake a more extended task in starting a press since it's not really my kind of endeavor. I'm doing Bob Grenier's Phantom Anthems; I was going to do only the one, but now may do two others which are already designated. I feel I shouldn't commit myself to any work beyond those. If I hear of another press as a possibility, I will tell you of it right away.

I would be nice to get together again meet for coffee sometime on one of the days you're over here. Please call if you have the time.

my best,
Leslie

May 11 [1988]

Dear Stephen,

I've had a chance to read the Sonnets through twice and I think it is most unusual and quite beautiful.

Only editing comment: is that the book might be even more effective if it were shorter, tightened somewhat. Anyway I like the work and am pleased you gave it to me to read - I'm, however, feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the work involved in publishing the books to which I'm committed. Originally deciding to do only two books - which I indicated to you when we spoke about DISTANCE, or I think it was three by then - I responded to many requests and am committed now to eight (!) more in the next year and a half if I get a grant. Which is complicated by wanting very much to get to work on my own writing.

I like your work. And I'm sorry that I can't consider other books until I've managed to publish the eight, which will be after a year and a half or two.

I know that you would prefer not to wait so long and will want to look for other possibilities.

We enjoyed the performance the other evening. I particularly liked the Atlantic City piece, which made me want to write a play.

I hope to get together again soon. (Would it be all right to return the manuscript by hand, or if there's no early opportunity I'll send it).

Love,
Leslie

Sunday, May 22 [1988]

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for your letter. Thinking about the work as a whole, I was aware of the need to do the complete set of 154 sonnets - also as you described hearing and seeing again the rhythmic movement and sound which recreates and is different from the original. My thought was that a few might be reconsidered (or - if some were left out, it might even be more precise in the sense of hearing 'certain' of the sonnets - but that's just a thought). I'll read it again reconsidering the whole and if you'd like note some of the poems.

In regard to publishing the book, I thought of making the suggestion which you then presented. I hesitated not knowing whether you would want to do that and also because of one other consideration: of the projected forthcoming books, four are financed in the next few months by O Books. The others are to be done if we receive a grant. It's easier to absorb expenditure over a longer period of time bringing two books out slowly. I'm embarrassed to ask this, but if you could make a contribution, say pay for the typesetting, and do some of the work - I would be glad to help design it and bring it out under O. Give me your thoughts on this. (Rick London as an example paid entirely for his second book *ABJECTIONS*, so it was a way of doing that). [sic]

Thank you for asking for some of my work. I think "Clarinet Part I Heard" with the other short piece, would be redundant at this point. But perhaps another short one; I'm working on a series of pieces which may be ready in a couple of months or so.

I'd also be happy to send you a copy of my novel to hear your comments. I decided to add a short part at the end, but as soon as I'm finished with that I'll send it to you.

Best,
Leslie

Sunday, Oct. 1 [1989]

Dear Stephen,

I've been taking some time to read and reread Present Tense - I'm sorry it's taken me a while to have a chance to do that.

Unfortunately, as I said to you where you gave me the manuscript I need to spend the next year fulfilling the number of obligations - and then to do fewer books over time in order to have the time for my own writing and to deal with the expense in publishing the books. I've tended to one book apiece of authors, or at least thought not to repeat for a while in order to do other authors - one consideration is that you've several good books out within the last year or two; even if you were to publish this one yourself it would be an effective way of getting it out (as you have an established press and knowledge of publishing.) I feel sorry not to be able to take on more. One other consideration is also that I've turned down a number of people and feel that it would be unfair not to abide now by my need to space the books over time.

These considerations are apart from the work itself. I enjoyed reading Present Tense; it has a[n] interesting quality which occurs in general in your writing of (using Susan Howe's title) articulations of sound forms in time. My view of it is that it is not finished, that you

might continue to work with the 'poem' (or book), in the sense of working inside it - attention to the changes in it. My sense of this particular work is of freely editing it in order to get to its terrain which is there in it. I know you probably will not agree with this, preferring to work with a larger expanse and continuation. A sound pattern that is continuous and inclusive as with Coolidge. But I could see that occurring by continuing working with it in the sense of hearing it in different ways - I simply have a sense of that reading it, pardon me if that is not relevant to your interest. It would be nice to get together soon and talk - I have to go to New York and Washington Oct. 5th to 15th, but shortly afterwards?

Best,
Leslie

2.25.92

Dear Leslie,

Thanks again for coming to visit my class last week. It was a lift into the present that opened eyes (and ears) in that room, I think, listening to their talk about you and your reading/talking carried on yesterday. As one person said, you seemed to be on another plane--she and others wanted to know more. Most of Monday tried to continue w/ discussion of issues raised by your presence and work. So it was a very nice start to this series. Mills check enclosed.

Also enclosed Ed Foster's review of Berrigan, which you may have seen already but if not will want to. It's good to see the word getting out -- will Poetry Flash do anything?

In other business, I still need to get O Books' share of the cost of Berrigan so I can move on to my next projects. The amount is \$975, break-down as follows: cost of typesetting lino, printing, royalties & freight (3900); one-half NEA (1950); one-fourth Avenue B / O Books (975).

Thanks again, hope your back is pulling together.

Best,
Stephen

June 28, 1995

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for your recent communication - I'm sorry I've delayed in responding; we were first traveling to Bhutan & Thailand, and Canada & New Mexico - and now I'm here teaching at Bard caught up with the busy schedule.

I'm sorry we won't be able to do the Stein course, but maybe in the future - ?

It's hot and hectic here but so far having a good summer. Saw the Guston exhibit in NYC featuring his collaboration with Coolidge, which I thought really interesting.

Let's have coffee again - ! - I'm back in August.

Best,
Leslie

May 26, 2000

Dear Stephen,

Thank you so much for the gift copy of your essay book, which I began immediately, and am enjoying it.

And of course thank you again for writing the piece on my work.

Best,
Leslie

[2.21.01]

Hi Leslie,

Great 'class' yesterday, great for them to be able to put the actual person together with the words. Here's a poem from today w/ some reference you'll recognize -- from the series I'm doing now (these 17-line 'prose poems' each w/ 5 sentences each w/ a comma, paying attention to the line

Dark green motion of wet leaves in front of left corner of adjacent house, red and brown finches flitting between the vertical column of feeder and rose on right. Long-haired man in bright blue Porsche parked next to driveway of white house, the woman in the blue sweater stuffing her suitcase into the phone booth on the train from Annandale to New York. Grid of 16 windows in back of the woman in the burnt orange sweater whose relation to first person is changed, woman in yellow sweater leaning back in the blue chair on the opposite diagonal plane. Man in heather shirt who plays the flute before the harmonica, orange disk rising in front of a bright green line. The white underside of a bird's wings passing in front of the wet sandstone cliff, thin blue line in dark grey cloud on right.

love,
Stephen

[2.22.01]

Thank you -- both poem and letter. I'm off to Milwaukee this morning for several days of work! See you soon hopefully -- I enjoyed the class -- love, Leslie

[7.21.02]

I'm here in New York City now, got here after four and a half hours in traffic and diversion, they said the city was flooded from a storm (but it wasn't); then there was an explosion and downtown New York had no electricity -- but I'm having a wonderful time. They fixed it also. One more week at Bard, I'm worn out; but some of the students are doing interesting work, a few of the writers and especially film students and sculptors...it's been good...see you in August I hope -- love, Leslie

[10.29.03]

Dear Leslie,

Such a nice dinner and talk last night -- maybe we will all become New Brutalists! Speaking of which Michael Cross's paper on Mathew Barney/Zukofsky is (he says) at the following address:

ps. Anyone interested might stop by the "Bottom: on Shakespeare" conference site at the EPC to read a bit from my paper on Zukofsky and Cremaster! www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~tdonovan/

And now I'm reading over your letter again (from 9.5), which has been sitting on my desk all this time waiting for an answer. I like sense you have that the writing in Painting 'is' painting, to me in a sense that the two-dimensional page of writing is somehow like the also two-dimensional plane of the canvas, on which present event and/or action in the world is 'transcribed' (in paint, in letters/words), seeing or hearing those things in both the world and the words. The long lines reaching across the horizontal page try to foreground the materiality of the page as a temporal fact, the time it takes to read the line in the space it takes to be written in/read, and the 'shift' between one moment and the next being part of that continuous linearity, unfolded across the page (lines) from one line to the next. So on the page 15 that you mention in your letter, I read:

pulling grass shoots up from between the edges of two bricks (subject)
 equivalent in temporal form
to fluid being drained from the man's head, the woman who speaks of going
 on a journey to the desert
after which he will ask for her (anaesthetized) in a manner that will
 appear to suggest something else

-- which tries to 'enact' the action of the pulling of the grass over the time it takes to read it, a physical action in its 'temporal form' as word, then moves/swerves (in thought) toward fluid in the person's head (my father actually, who'd taken a fall while he was walking one day (those hikes I was telling you about), an alarming moment for all of us! Anyway, I like your idea that there's the presence of someone you call "a former self" -- represented "in colors and sights seen" I agree, and the relation of that one to the one who is writing in each present moment/page/line of the writing. You ask some questions near the end of your letter that I don't quite follow: "one has the sense the writing is not grappling with anything?" (I wonder about this now since each page/poem is the writing of another 'day' of thinking, and also thus seeing and hearing, things in the actual world going on out 'there' and also thus in the words). Also "why do one painting after another" (but I wouldn't call the poems paintings themselves nor are they 'about' painting or paintings, though they do try to 'describe' events taking place in actual world/time and in the two-dimensions of the writing on the page). So to me, everything DOES have what you call "a phenomenal connection" -- through the entire 'series' I would hope.

Well, enough of that for now -- thanks for writing your thoughts on Painting! And thanks for the newest O Books and for a lovely time last night.

Bests,
Stephen

[10.3.05]

Dear Stephen,
Nice to hear from you. I hope you can, but we've been thinking of you and thought it would be nice to see you. Perhaps sometime we'll be able to come out to Bolinas. I wanted to ask if you would be willing to write a blurb for the cover of a book I'm publishing written by your former student, Padcha Tuntha-obas. She mentioned when she first wrote me that you had recommended she send her ms to me. Anyway, we'd be honored if you have the time to write a comment for it. Thank you. --- my best,
Leslie

[10.5.05]

hi leslie,

thanks for this, nice to hear from you! I'd be pleased to write something on padcha's book, she was a great person in the program and I'm a great fan of her work. Let's make a plan to see you/us when we can -- I remember the night of dinner in Olema, Johnny about to be in the world, and now he's already so big.... hope you're well, good to hear you are publishing all of these books! I hear you read in NY w/ JA a few weeks ago, must have been an event of fall season there.....

bests,
stephen

[10.5.05]

Dear Stephen -- yes I read with Ashbery and it was great fun. I'll send you Padcha's ms. Tom's on a short trip but when he returns I'll contact you and see if we can get together. --- my best, Leslie

[3.6.06]

Dear Leslie,

I just found an email from Teresa Miller telling me she'd spoken to you at Mills on Saturday about her manuscript. She's a very good poet I think, and if it doesn't get taken where she's sent it now, it's good to think that you asked her to send it to you.

I was in New York to read at Bard on Thursday (it was cancelled due to snow storm, I will get to go back again in the fall or spring), and the Zinc last night. Heard about your reading at the Bowery w/ Mei-mei, recorded on Penn Sound I hear (so we can ALL get to hear it I hope!).

Nice to see you but too briefly on the porch that Friday, maybe we can have dinner one of these days?

Bests,
Stephen

[3.7.06]

Yes, let's get together in April----I'm leaving tomorrow morning for a trip to Egypt and Libya with my father, and will return on April 3rd. It would be nice to go out to dinner in Bolinas or have you over here. Let's be in touch --- my best, Leslie

[9.14.07]

Thank you---it's a pleasure to hear about your class. And I hope my own class will go okay in regard to the books I'm trying! Yes, I was pleased to see one of the students at the City Lights reading. And yes, I want to have you and Simone over for dinner---she's coming back at some point---and because we're all so busy getting things underway I thought to wait for her. --- love, Leslie

[9.26.07]

hi leslie,
I wonder if some of my students from the listening to reading class might be able to come to your class next monday (I had asked Ron if he could come to my class on Thursday but, as you can see, he won't be here).
thanks,
Stephen

[9.27.07]

Yes that would be fine (for them to visit) but is it okay to allow my students to ask questions first? (I don't mean to be selfish...there might be time for various students to ask questions, but if you could ask them to hold off just a few minutes...) Thank you -- my best, leslie

[10.2.07]

Dear Stephen,
Tom has been diagnosed with throat cancer and he is going to start radical treatment of radiation and chemo together next week. We've been spending every day on appointments lining up the various treatments. In the midst of this my class seems to be going fine.
But I have one request I need to ask. You mentioned that it was okay to miss one class, which of course should be covered. I've cancelled all outside activities for this time except one, a reading at Penn and another at New York city Nov 11-14. This would mean that my Nov 12th class is not covered. I thought I would not have to miss that class or any at all but yesterday I discovered that I'd been looking at the October calendar when I made the plan, instead of November. I asked Lyn Hejinian if she could teach the class (we're reading Happily later in the semester) but she can't because she herself is teaching that night.
Could you possibly teach that class for me? I will be eternally in your debt. I can't not hold the class because we missed one class as a result of the holiday. On November 12 the class is discussing Nate Mackey's SPLAY ANTHEM, the second week of studying it---plus the students' poems. Thank you --- best, Leslie

[11.15.07]

Dear Stephen,
I wanted to be in touch to ask how the class went? I hope you got my (long) phone message about it? I returned from NY last night. Tom's been very ill, so though the trip went well, I worried exceedingly about him. I appreciate very much your having taught my class---I needed this little break in order to be optimistic. Thank you for your help. Please let me know what happened with the students. --- my best, leslie

[11.15.07]

Hi Leslie,
thanks for this, I called and left a message on the saturday/sunday after you'd called but maybe you didn't get it. the class was very good I think -- I enjoyed it and think the students did too. Great to read Mackey's book (for me) and talk about it w/ them, for first half of class, we ranged around about dreams/music/form/shape, etc. and after the break we read from students' work. Thanks for having me in to do it, indeed.

I'm sorry Tom is still struggling! Please give him my very best in all wishes/things.

Stephen

ps. the dept. has asked me to visit your class as part of ordinary 'review' of visiting teachers -- I was thinking of next Monday (the 19th) or the following Monday (just an hour or so at the start) let me know if this is okay. I see you'll be talking about Day / Ocean which would be interesting to me.

[11.16.07]

Okay yes, I'll be expecting you next Monday. I'm told that you showed a bit from the tape of the 'Can't' is 'Night' performance in your class. I am going to show some of it too. Can you tell me approximately what part(s) you showed? so as not to repeat. --- Tom told me after I e-mailed you that you had left a message, he told me the content but apologized that somehow he had erased it unintentionally. I'm very glad you enjoyed the class, they are a good group. --- my best, leslie

[3.2.08]

Hi Leslie, I'm thinking of coming to the first part of your class tomorrow (just a short time since I'm supposed to be in a meeting at 4:00, and so I couldn't stay long, long enough to say I've 'seen you' in the classroom at least). Otherwise I could come at 5:30 for a half hour -- would that work for you if I can set it up?
Hope things are good,
Steve

[3.3.08]

My class starts at 4:00. Earlier in the class time would be best, I think--an active discussion period. But if you can't come until 5:30 we will probably be discussing a student's poems, not so active. Anyway, see you later today I gather. Thank you --- my best, Leslie

[2.8.09]

Dear Stephen, I just wanted to be in touch, since we spoke only briefly and you didn't get the invitation I'd sent earlier, to remind you of the party at our house celebrating two new O Books: on Weds Feb 11th at 7:30 pm. The address as you know is: 5744 Presley Way, Oakland 94618, between Chabot and Miles, one block up and running parallel to College Ave. My home phone is: 510 654-8410. The two books/authors are Debts and Obligations by Alicia Cohen (who is visiting my class on Tues and reading with me at Moes that night) and M. Mara-Ann: Containment Scenario. I hope you can make it. Simone and Etel may be coming if Etel feels well enough, and you might check to see in case you'd like to come over with them or with Simone (supposing etel isn't up to it). --- my best, Leslie

[2.8.09]

Hi Leslie,
this just came in, as I'm on email too -- and yes, I AM hoping to come over w/ Johnny, it would be great to see you (and everyone, too!). And I DID get the invitation, a day or so after we spoke so it must've been in transit. That is great that you did Mara-Ann's book -- I read it as a thesis (though I'd never seen any of her work before that) and was really impressed.....

Best to you,
Stephen

[2.8.09]

Dear Stephen,
Thank you. By-the-way, as you can appreciate I'm not saying to anyone (especially not to the Mills students) that Mara-Ann was a Mills student, or that I read her thesis and decided to publish it---because for obvious reasons that would lead to trouble...look forward to seeing you and Johnny. --- love, leslie

[2.9.09]

Dear Leslie,

Oh yes! I completely understand. I published a book w/ Avenue B, called Involuntary Vision: After Kurosawa's Dreams, that was an anthology of poems by Mills poets, edited by Michael Cross, and it too seemed at the time at least to be something of the same issue - but as it turned out it wasn't really an issue, and I am happy that I did it. Anyway, I didn't know that You were also reading Mara's ms., which seemed to me (by the time it arrived on my desk, having never seen any of her poetry up till then) to be completely realized and great. And so I am glad that you did it! I'm looking forward to Wed and seeing you and Tom, it will be OUR BIG NIGHT OUT!

Love,
Stephen

[2.9.09]

Good!---love, Leslie

[4.25.09]

Dear Leslie,

If it isn't too late, please add a word to that title, which should read:

Remarks on Color / (Sound)

(And if it's too late, no problem.)

But mostly I wanted to say that I hope your father is okay ---- that operation sounded so intense, my thoughts are with you.....

Stephen

[4.26.09]

Okay, it is not too late. I will add to your title. Thank you for your thoughts on my father. His operation and the last few days have been terrible, but though he's still in the intensive care unit, today he seems better. ---- my best, Leslie

[5.16.09]

Sorry Stephen, it's not possible to change the title now, we changed it at the last minute, before.

The trip to New York was very good but we returned to find my father in very desperate shape, incomprehensible in his cognition, unable to move, groaning---my sister and I went wild wanting to extract him from the rehabilitation hospital where he'd been moved. But the next day he was off some medicine the doctor had given him and returned to alertness; and began physical therapy. What an ordeal! Apparently elderly people can't take painkiller or any drug very well (he hallucinated on Vicodin, so was given an anti-hallucinating medicine which caused his utter decline). Now he's not on anything, and is doing well.

I hope your beginning of vacation is going well. --- best, Leslie

[3.8.10]

Hi Leslie,
It was a pleasure to see you and talk tonight - also to get to see and talk with Michael and Amy. Also, I realized on the way home that I gave you the wrong manuscript - so I will bring a copy of PAINTING to your reading tomorrow.

My best,
Stephen

[3.9.10]

Okay, regarding the ms. I also enjoyed last night. Come again!---Leslie

These letters are excerpted from a larger collection.

Stephen Ratcliffe's most recent books are [Reading the Unseen: \(Offstage\) Hamlet](#) (Counterpath, 2010) and [Conversation](#) (Bootstrap, 2010); his daily poems can be found at stephenratcliffe.blogspot.com and his readings are at [Penn Sound](#). He lives in Bolinas, California and teaches at Mills College.