

Duration in/of the line

(On Leslie Scalapino's *It's go in/ quiet illumined grass/ land*)

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I have the intent of placing the individual's and all mass actions on one line continually and their (they're) all starting together at one line which is 'coming up' starting again and again. One's being in this wild present (war, corruption, kindness); one is in any case but may not notice it. It's (the wild present's and the line's) any events. Hasn't outside. Hasn't oneself. The line (of writing) is only *there*, on the page.

—Leslie Scalapino, "Eco-logic in Writing"ⁱ

Scalapino first presented the poem *It's go in/ quiet illumined grass/ land* at the opening of American sculptor Petah Coyne's exhibition "White Rain" at Galerie Lelong in New York City in 2001. Coyne spoke of her exhibit as "a female and an American response" to the bombing of Hiroshima at the end of World War II, referencing Masuji Ibuse's book *Black Rain* and the phenomenon of nuclear fallout.ⁱⁱ For the artist, thinking of the Hiroshima bombing in the aftermath of 9/11 brought back horrific memories of ash-covered bodies of victims and witnesses of the terrorist attacks in NYC that she associated with the ceramic white pigment on the bodies of dancers of Butoh, the dance of the dead born in Japan in the fifties. This association was echoed in the exhibition's thirteen sculptures made of melted off-white and grey wax, richly encrusted with various materials such as beads, ribbons, flowers, tiny figurines, as well as fake and stuffed birds. As Martha Schwendener wrote, in Coyne's work the "gray area between 'light' images and death, a territory that shrinks when mortality is to be

acknowledged and confronted (...) suggest[s] that the aesthetics of celebration and mourning tend to blur together.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Petah Coyne and Leslie Scalapino’s friendship was a long-standing artistic-poetic exchange that took many forms: conversations, texts sent by fax, photographs, and sculptures. Their singular yet also converging bodies of work focus on the irreducible materiality and transfigurative destiny of all forms. They tap into the dialectical force of events in space and time, reinvestigating factors shaping different facets of reality and interrogating our ways of perceiving the world, observing its deeply unsettling fundamental opacity. What motivates Scalapino and Coyne’s engagements with a disturbing co-occurrence of devastating, traumatizing events and moments of elation or ecstasy is the need for deeper scrutiny and critique of the ways in which we try to make sense of reality’s underlying contradictions beyond our grasp or comprehension. Whereas Coyne’s art encourages contemplation of sculpture as the medium of both collective and personal memory, often inviting references to religion or myth, Scalapino’s writing requires extreme mental concentration, or even exertion, necessary to uphold attention to the shifting dynamics between reality and one’s mind’s actions (mind phenomena), engaging us in continuous efforts to apprehend the extent of our misapprehension of reality. Audacious in her formal exploration and speculation on what writing could become and do, the poet experimented with a structure of writing divested of hierarchy (or the “non-hierarchical structure of writing”, as she referred to it^{iv}), drawing out durations that mobilize emergent forms of writing that reckon with the overwhelming quality of the present.

The poet’s famous statement “Activity is the only community,” from her essay “The Radical Nature of Experience,” captures the importance of her collaborations with Coyne and a host of other artists and poets (such as Marina Adams, Kiki Smith, or the poet Philip Whalen, to whom *It’s go...* is also dedicated, among many others).^v Construed as collaborative work, activity is an underlying aspect of Scalapino’s writing that points to its deeply relational aspect,

as well as its inwardness and durational aspect. The poet and Soto Zen priest Norman Fischer addressed Scalapino's Buddhist understanding of activity as related to "writing practice as a practice of being in time": "[It] meant for Leslie "deeply inward engagement, i.e. writing: writing as experience, the most intimate form of living; but writing as being not fundamentally different from any other living—writing as activity in which all times exist simultaneously, the living times as well as the writing times, of one's self, as well as others, in the place where one is in writing (everywhere; nowhere) as well as all other places—there's no logic, there is no linearity in time, occurrence, thought, no separation, no inside or outside—but each step, in living or writing (which are the same) contains all other steps."^{vi}

In my own writing on Scalapino, I have been focusing on what I described as the poet's speculative modality of realism that outpaces conventions of the realist mode, upping the ante of the real and resituating poetry as a new form of philosophical inquiry.^{vii} I ended this work with an unassuming line excerpted from one of Scalapino's plays *Goya's L.A.*: "[w]e don't know what writing is,"^{viii} which offers humbling realization that writing remains open to transformation and redefinition against convention and refuses instrumentality of a purely intellectual or scholarly exercise. In *It's go...*, we encounter a line that captures the poet's desire to lift poetry from the procedures of rigid theoretical examination, shifting its focus to reinvestigation of poetic language as motion: „The theory of/ the flower is wholly different from/ its motion."^{ix}

It's go in/ quiet illumined grass/ land unfolds as experimentation with the ongoingness of the poetic line that relies on movement and resists conventional logic or linearity; instead, it makes small motions that uphold the poem, like the word "go" (or the poem's phrases "just go" and "it's go"). The line continues not despite but through disjunction that each time signals impermanence of occurrence and of our experience of it, which is what Scalapino captured in her *Autobiography*: "experience is exactly 'that' occurrence only as *being* one's

impermanence”^x, and, further in the same text, “[s]o that one is in motions—before ‘them.’”^{xi} In *It’s go...*, one finds exploration of a terrain, seen as geographical and mental space at once, where one’s relation to the real could be grasped before it is formed, or fixed, and before one capitulates to any closed optics. This can be done only in writing and with full recognition of the impossibility of such a gesture.

Discussing her early work *hmmmm* in an extensive, in-depth interview with Michael Cross, Scalapino mentions “light extremity,” a sensation akin to that captured by the vernacular phrase of being “blown away,” arising from a state of shock; “a violent conjunction of circumstances, the sense of the individual’s (my) private context and a violent outside, public context (...) entering or being the same space.”^{xii} “Light extremity” captures the wild, contradictory feeling of losing one’s self in the maddening permanence of irreconcilable circumstances, of being “dismantled, no longer there”, yet “curiously free.”^{xiii}

It’s go in/ quiet illumined grass/ land, which at times echoes “light extremity,” is a durational composition in which the speaker’s observation of social oppression and suffering clashes with the desire to free herself from their grip. Life lived in a permanent state of conflict is captured in the resonant phrase “living in the subjunctive,” conveying dissatisfaction as well as pointing to what remains unattainable, yet is imagined, hoped for, or expected^{xiv}. The word “subjunctive” appears at several different junctures throughout the poem; its recursive, charged presence sets in motion writing’s durational force and mobilizes both interior and exterior scrutiny. Reading the poem, I find myself in a space where things are already happening, moving, and the poem’s composition belongs to occurrence and movement rather than interferes with them as something external to the public world. The poem’s title opens with the verb “to go,” offering a cue for motion as something immediately available, gesturing to the activity of writing itself, but also something that meets with considerable resistance in the social sphere. The word’s repetition sounds notes of urgency and internal struggle. The text opens a

vast expanse of the “quiet illumined grass land,” described both in terms of elation, light, and day, projected alongside negativity associated with the social realm, night, darkness, as well as psychic and physical suffering, showing these seemingly disparate elements as arising together. The subjunctive is repeatedly mentioned throughout the poem, making the reader consider the ambivalence that living hypothetically, i.e. not really living, entails: not only due to the oppression underlying social space, but also gesturing toward a possibility of living differently “not to be social only”, “to walk so slowly as not to be social” or “so slow that [one] outraces eludes [the others who are social only].”^{xv} The image of slow movement points to writing’s motions in the composition that otherwise foregrounds acute awareness of negative space in which the visions of Arcadia and “quiet illumined grass/ land” are unattainable in the face of social pressure and different forms of suffering.

One way of approaching the poem is to trace its performance of possibility and impossibility *at once* through tracing the small motions of line units. The line’s duration is extended in the temporal, spatial and sonic sense, showing a movement toward transformative experience without embracing the illusion of withdrawing from the social sphere or directing one’s attention away from internal or external conflict. Duration enhances the poem’s ambience, its intra- and extra-textual acoustics, working in ways alternative to the text visible on the page, since seeing, or observing, of the social space is dismantled throughout the text by its arrhythmic, disjunctive, variational, but at the same time repetitive, mantra-like qualities. In his anthology of North American Buddhist poetry, Andrew Schelling compared Scalapino’s poem to the Tibetan prayer wheel, a device on which mantras are inscribed.^{xvi} Such resonance can be heard when the poet reads, or differently, when one hears her reading transformed and extended through Steve Layton’s music in his album *The Month of Endings*^{xvii}. Looking at duration in the poem, one could also investigate its immersive, sensory quality in relation to the faculty of hearing that Scalapino explores in her unfinished work *Hearing*, co-written with Lyn

Hejinian^{xviii}, as well as reflect on what Nathaniel Mackey identified as “[l]anguage’s ability to perform is variable and site-specific, mind, ear, eye, air, page, and other sites conducing to particular powers and effects.”^{xix} In *It’s go...*, to use Mackey’s phrasing, “words perform on multiple fronts.”^{xx} Consider this excerpt:

It’s go in
horizontal
half evening in the same
place
barrier and walking

mechanism of raise
so
no
continuum in them
then
‘at’
the same instant any
where then^{xxi}

Here, the lines’ shape/sound mobilizes a spatial arrangement of three short monosyllabic words go (movement)/ so (causality)/ no (negation) as central, their o’s additionally echoed in other words “horizontal”, “of”, and “continuum,” crucial to the poem’s emphasis on the line’s ongoing movement. They are open visually, but also sonically, creating the shape/sound of language in space where other words also rhyme or are repeated (them/ then/ then// same/ place/

raise), creating a sensation of witnessing the words' occurrence in space or overhearing how they are slowly, intently spoken. Evocative of Gertrude Stein's sense of compositional temporality as the "prolonged" or "continuous" present, the poem is preoccupied with duration in and of the line enacted spatially, where all spaces become one space, temporally, where all times are in fact the present time, and sonically, where sound, noise and silence co-exist on one conceptually calmed down terrain that creates, in the poet's words, "the sense of real place as a 'new' conceptual/ as geographical space [of writing now]"^{xxii}. Amidst suffering caused by social oppression and conflict, writing entails constant reckoning with one's own complicity in their insidious mechanisms. Aware of such complicity, poetic writing can be conceptually liberating as long as it upholds heightened attention to the regenerative potential of remaking relations between social and mental space: "Writing enables the making of that spatial relation (of land and mind-phenomena, the two placed beside each other). It's a relation that's going on in every instant but writing can also 'make' it (future) by altering space, allowing one to see one's own (also) joyful movement in space (making that) as well as being one's movement and seeing others' movements as joyful. The text is the altered space, sometimes one's to walk 3-D in it at jetting evening"^{xxiii}.

ⁱ Leslie Scalapino, "Eco-logic in Writing." *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold*. Litmus Press, 2011. 87.

ⁱⁱ Jan Garden Castro, "Controlled Passion: A Conversation with Petah Coyne." *Sculpture* (June 1st, 2002).

<https://sculpturemagazine.art/controlled-passion-a-conversation-with-petah-coyne/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Martha Schwendener, "Petah Coyne. [Rev. of 'White Rain.'" *Artforum* 40.6 (2002).

<https://www.artforum.com/events/petah-coyne-2-206696/>

^{iv} Leslie Scalapino, "The Radical Nature of Experience [on Philip Whalen, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, and Leslie Scalapino]." *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold*. Litmus Press, 2011. 193.

^v *ibid.*

^{vi} Norman Fischer, *Experience: Thinking, Writing, Language & Religion*. University of Alabama Press, 2016. 187-88.

^{vii} Małgorzata Myk. *Upping the Ante of the Real: Speculative Poetics of Leslie Scalapino*. Peter Lang, 2019.

^{viii} Leslie Scalapino, *Goya's L.A.*. Potes & Poets Press, 1994. 7.

^{ix} Leslie Scalapino. *It's go in/ quiet illumined grass/ land*. 35.

^x Leslie Scalapino, *Zither & Autobiography*. Wesleyan University Press, 2003. 12.

^{xi} *ibid.*

^{xii} Leslie Scalapino with Michael Cross, Last Interview & "Poetics." *Further Other Book Works*, 2016. 11-12.

^{xiii} *ibid.*

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- ^{xiv} Leslie Scalapino. *It's go in/ quiet illumined grass/ land*. 4.
- ^{xv} *ibid.*, . 3.
- ^{xvi} Andrew Schelling, ed. *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry*. Wisdom Publications, 2005. 9-11.
- ^{xvii} Steve Layton, A Soundpiece in Response to *It's go in/ quiet Illumined grass/ land* (2018).
https://stevelayton.bandcamp.com/page/tralbum_page/1/track/its-go-in-quiet-illuminated-grass-land-leslie-scalapino
- ^{xviii} Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino. *Hearing*. Litmus Press, 2021.
- ^{xix} Nathaniel Mackey. *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*. University of Iowa Press, 2018. 229.
- ^{xx} *ibid.*, 230.
- ^{xxi} Leslie Scalapino. *It's go in/ quiet illumined grass/ land*. 23.
- ^{xxii} Leslie Scalapino, *Zither & Autobiography*. 19.
- ^{xxiii} Scalapino, "Eco-logic in Writing." 89.