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LIFE FICTIONS: RADICALIZATION OF LIFE-WRITING IN LESLIE
SCALAPINO'S
ZITHER & AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND *DAHLIA'S IRIS: SECRET
AUTOBIOGRAPHY & FICTION*

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses radicalized aesthetics and politics of structure and form in the experimental autobiographical writing of American avant-garde author Leslie Scalapino. Associated with the innovative protocols of the "Language School" poetry movement, Scalapino's oeuvre emerges as simultaneously a poststructuralist and phenomenologically oriented poetics in which writing performs a thoroughgoing scrutiny of how one's implication in linguistic and cultural matrices determines one's being in the world. Scalapino's *Autobiography*, framed by Paul de Man's remarks on autobiographical writing as always controlled by the external expectations of self-fashioning, sets out to examine and deconstruct the autobiographical project as in itself constructive of one's life. In *Zither* the poet complicates her take on life-writing by interrogating and reconceptualizing hidden mechanisms of the genre and confronting it with its own fictional status, while in *Dahlia's iris* Scalapino juxtaposes detective fiction with a Tibetan form of written "secret autobiography", based on a radical departure from the chronology of one's biography toward a phenomenological horizon of what she refers to as "one's life seeing", a practice of attempting to see one's mind's constructions as they are formed by the outside as well as by one's internalization of the outside.

Key words: Language School, Leslie Scalapino, autobiography, avant-garde writing, Paul de Man, life writing

“I don’t write as genre, being a convention merely fictional, not actual. Actual *is* fictional.”

– Leslie Scalapino¹

In his essay on autobiographical writing, titled “Autobiography, memory and mechanisms of concealment”, American experimental author Michael Palmer evokes lines from modernist poet Laura (Riding) Jackson’s *The telling*:

There is something to be told about us for the telling of which we all wait. In our unwilling ignorance we hurry to listen to stories of old human life, new human life, fancied human life, avid of something to while away the time of unanswered curiosity. We know we are explainable, and not explained. Many of the lesser things concerning us have been told, but the greater things have not been told; and nothing can fill their place. Whatever we learn of what is not ourselves, but ours to know, being of our universal world, will likewise leave the emptiness an emptiness. Until the missing story of ourselves is told, nothing besides told can suffice us: we shall go on quietly craving it. ((Riding) Jackson quoted in Perelman 1985: 438)

For Palmer (1985: 439), (Riding) Jackson’s words capture the paradoxical nature of our insatiable impulse of giving and receiving an account of ourselves by engaging “language at an intimate point of resistance”. Riding prefigures the poststructuralist anxiety concerning the autobiographical mode of writing; a deeper and more universal account “for the telling of which we all wait” and the implicit impossibility of arriving at “the missing story of ourselves” beyond the restless and compulsive telling of stories of human life ((Riding) Jackson quoted in Perelman 1985: 438). Along these lines, the preoccupation with the autobiography of the avant-garde poet and essayist Leslie Scalapino instantiates the engagement of “language at an intimate point of resistance” via a formally and conceptually radical aesthetics that problematizes the notions of narrative, experience, and self, postulating an immanent critique of life-writing. While Scalapino does not entirely deny or dismiss the narrative, her forays into traditionally conceived, narrative-based autobiography effect its radical redistribution and reconceptualization into a mode of writing preoccupied with the gesture of its own unfolding while simultaneously engaged in scrutinizing the process of *seeing* one’s *being* in the world.

Associated with experimental protocols of the “Language school” poets and sharing their general skepticism towards identity politics and the status of subjectivity in writing, Scalapino’s position is both poststructuralist and phenomenological in its deconstructive effort and insistence on perceiving writing as a demonstration of one’s mind’s actions. Scalapino’s writing is informed by a number of literary, theoretical, and philosophical contexts; in the texts where the poet

¹ Scalapino (1996: 10, emphasis mine, MM).

engages with autobiography she is particularly indebted to Gertrude Stein's autobiographical writings, Stein's essay "Composition as explanation", as well as the Tibetan and Zen buddhism of Nāgārjuna and Dōgen. In her impressive oeuvre of numerous avant-garde poetry collections, experimental fictions, intergenre writings, essays, and plays, the works most directly preoccupied with life-writing are *Zither & Autobiography* and *Dahlia's iris: Secret autobiography & fiction*, both published in 2003. In these writings Scalapino adopts a formally and conceptually radical mode of poetic inquiry that undermines the conception of a dominant language and, as the poet writes in her collection of essays *The public world / Syntactically impermanence*, postulates the possibility of a "non-hierarchical structure of writing" (1999: 3). Autobiography, a text interspersed with theoretical and philosophical remarks on life-writing, provides a fairly accessible and chronological account of Scalapino's artistic biography, but it does not simply showcase postmodern skepticism towards life-writing, or perform the "laying bare of the device" of the genre, to use Shklovsky's well-known idiom. In *Autobiography* Scalapino examines the very event of the text's construal (and of the autobiographical genre) phenomenologically, as if radicalizing the notion of an autobiographical mode into an extremely close observation of the movement of thought, and of one's being in events, seeing them as an always socially contingent process of mind formation. Such a radicalization of autobiography is also enacted in *Zither's* hermetic experiment of rewriting Shakespeare's *King Lear* beyond the actual play's language, characters, or plot, and in *Dahlia's iris*, a tour de force avant-garde novel that deploys the Tibetan practice of "secret autobiography", which, combined with a deconstructive treatment of the murder-mystery genre, equates the artifice of life-writing with the practice of fiction writing. In order to demonstrate Scalapino's radicalized position on life-writing, and writing in general, I use the term "radicalization" deployed in Katarina Kolozova's recent François Laruelle inspired nonstandard philosophical approach to the notion of subjectivity, explicated in her 2014 study *Cut of the real: Subjectivity in post-structuralist philosophy* as "getting to the roots of the discourse that has become one's theoretical inertia. (...) questioning the content and mechanisms of autoconstitution and autolegitimization inherent in the founding conceptual constructs of a theoretical discourse" (2014: 53). In the following essay, I contend that Scalapino advances a radicalization of the autobiographical mode seen as a social and cultural construct, both formally and conceptually, performing a thoroughgoing questioning of autoconstitution and autolegitimization of the concepts of subjectivity, experience, and memory.

Published in a single volume, the two-piece *Zither & Autobiography* opens with an epigraph from Paul de Man's *The rhetoric of Romanticism*. Scalapino's reference to de Man's position is worth quoting here in its entirety, because it helps to situate Scalapino's project in the broader context of poststructuralism:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative in one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity? (de Man quoted in Scalapino 2003a: 1, original emphasis)

De Man's thoughts on autobiography included in the chapter "Autobiography as de-facement" from his aforementioned work frame Scalapino's text for a number of important reasons. Firstly, both de Man and Scalapino are preoccupied with the poststructuralist dictum that the difference between autobiography and fiction presents an irreducible undecidable, and inquire whether it is possible to inhabit this undecidable instead of trying to overcome it. Secondly, Scalapino finds in de Man's thinking a crucial context for her own effort to undermine a sense of autobiography as a kind of discourse that converts it into a genre that then consequently fails to stand up to its elevated generic status as always already contingent on the hierarchy and rank of other canonically defined genres. Thirdly, like de Man's, Scalapino's writing relies on the problematization of the autobiographical genre as productive of reliable self-knowledge, confronting head-on the questions of authorship, authority, and, speaking more broadly, the conception of genre in general. Along these lines, Scalapino's writing emerges as a critical scrutiny of the paradox involved in the textual production of a life that de Man articulates in *The Rhetoric*:

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be *by* someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical.

But just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be." (1984: 70)

Finally, de Man's thinking resonates for Scalapino's long-standing critique of the constructed nature of memory inextricably connected with the mechanisms of

mind formation; a concern that de Man encapsulates further in the chapter: “Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause” (1984: 82).

Scalapino begins *Autobiography* with a fragment of her 1997 letter to author Norman Fischer, recalling her youthful “anarchist moment” of the Buddhism-inspired rejection of the notions of authority and authorship, accompanied by a recognition of the illusory, constructed nature of memory: “In the process, I’ve created this memory track. Yet had the sense that I had to make fixed memories move as illusion, that they move as illusions” (2003a: 2). The poet views memories as constructs, comparing them to implants that were mechanically put into the Replicants in Ridley Scott’s *The Blade Runner*, and focuses on the mind’s actions as performed in writing as a process of “experimentation of mind formation”; the movement of thought as prone to “active fantasy (...) seeking illusion, as if before event” (2003a: 2-3). She combines the poststructuralist problematization of experience as constructed and situated, related to both interiority and exteriority, and incapable of directly grasping or processing occurrence, with a distinctly phenomenological perspective: “One has to depart from both one’s motions-in-events, from events, and from one’s mind motions which are separate present—(which one does anyway) traveling continuous: in order to cause that separation, as if motion ‘before’” (2003a: 12). At the same time, Scalapino emphasizes the impossibility of an outside, which is nevertheless inadvertently created in one’s perception and in writing. In her work the outside is often equated with the social whereas the inside stands for one’s inner life and perception, yet both the outside and inside become questioned as underlying concepts of Western dualistic logics:

There is no exterior. But we make that exterior, we make that distinction all the time, so I’m talking about making the distinction in one’s perception or one’s apprehension. In the writing, I’m making the distinction—actions out there—and the difference between interior perception and those activities of people or oneself in those activities. As if one were separate from the action that one is in, and as if on either side of that equation there was silence. So where is the perceiving being? “Being” in the sense of being there at the instant and also the being person. (Brewster 2004)

Autobiography serves as a companion piece to Scalapino’s other, more challenging writings by explaining how her views on experience have been informed by Zen practice as well as the Japanese poetic diaries of the Middle Ages (Heian period). The insight that Scalapino gained from Zen is that one has to continue undercutting the conception of one’s self, along with one’s constructed memory and experience, until their fixed relation to events is dismantled. In *Autobiography* Scalapino writes of “using this process of dismemberment of one’s own thought as the instant of tackling the ‘process of hierarchical definition’” (2003a:

18). In Japanese diaries Scalapino found compelling the insistence on the awareness of one's fundamental impermanence despite the lingering sense of the self that nevertheless has no substantial authority in the continuing structure of one's life or work; instead, subjectivity is conceptualized as a process of "wondering what one is" (2003a: 41). Throughout her work subjectivity is always conceptualized as implicated in mechanisms of so called "cultural abstractions", i.e.: forms of visual culture, such as, for instance, comic books or films, as projections of conflicts in culture in a given period of time (hence the poet's fascination with the movies such as *The Blade Runner* and *The invasion of the Body Snatchers* where, as she wrote, one can identify a projection of the American "I" as a certain kind of appearance; a limited and closed ego image that remains unchanged precisely due to the fact of being completely annihilated as its own double: "Yes, everything expresses a social or political vision. My writing is fabrication of self, of subjectivity (which itself is seen to be 'cultural abstraction'), yet in it the 'self' is not separable from its own illusion" (Scalapino quoted in Frost and Hogue 2006: 306). *Autobiography* establishes a mode of writing further radicalized in *Zither* and *Dahlia's iris*, where the Western notions of self, memory, or experience are constantly questioned, deconstructed, and reconceptualized. In the 1999 poetry collection *New life*, Scalapino writes: "The writing is not narrative 'telling' the story or stories of events. Rather, it is movements, a movement that was a 'real' event where all is fictional as phenomena. (...) Biography that is not 'completed / whole' 'a life', poems, fictions, not-illustrating, are not an early form, undeveloped narrative, but as mere movements are subject to scrutiny by phenomena, are 'the life's construction per se'" (1999: 12). Writing in such a radicalized form is equated with being, since it is preoccupied with tracing, as if in real time, one's complicity in internalizing and reproducing social norms and hierarchies: "The sense that I have is as if one does see all the time the way reality occurs — as having no inherent reality really — it's just motions — and that one is being re-trained as language continually, to think as a description of something. So, a task of writing of my period was (is) to undo one's formations, all, interior and cultural, at every instant" (Scalapino 2003a: 48). Written as a commentary to *Autobiography*, *Zither* is a performance of this kind of radicalization; an exercise in conceptual undoing par excellence.

In her introductory article to the critical feature on Scalapino published in the Spring 2004 issue of *How2*, a web-based magazine devoted to women's innovative writing practices, scholar and poet Laura Hinton performs a reading of *Zither & Autobiography* that eschews an interpretation of the work's themes and instead turns to seeing writing as a form of action vis-à-vis the critic's vulnerability in the encounter with Scalapino's intentionally intractable design that remains partially hermetic to the reader. Hinton manages to overcome these obstacles by forging her own interaction with the text, focusing on its form and underlying

structure rather than content, whereby the work slowly reveals itself as a conceptual exercise yielding the potential of freedom. As another instance of radicalized autobiography, *Zither* announces its method already in the first line: “Making a fictional action ‘on top of’ one’s life actions” (2003a: 51). The text purports to be a rewriting of *King Lear*, although further in the text we learn that it is also a rewriting of Kurosawa’s *Ran*, which is also a rewriting of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Scalapino’s intention is to engage with the underlying structure of Shakespeare’s play “without using his characters, language, or plot” (2003a: 51). Paradoxically, this perversely defiant announcement does not undermine her project; even though *Zither* appears to be something else than *King Lear*, the actual play’s resonance is maintained throughout the text, whose dynamics echoes Lear’s predicament of being a prisoner of his own mind, caught up in the same oppressive patriarchal structures that he created, mirroring his inevitable descent into madness as the language of *Zither* gradually becomes sparse and intractable. Scalapino writes: “A complete transformation of Lear is a construct of Western and Asian conceptions as the motions of the mind, only the mind being action or phenomena as writing. As to enable a state of freedom, by arriving at such an unknown shape” (2003a: 51, original emphasis). Hinton (2004) observes that *Zither* is “about near-death as language symptom and sign.” Indeed, Scalapino combines here Buddhist reflection on dying and suffering, remembrance of her friend who committed suicide, and frequently evoked images of extreme poverty that the poet saw during her travels in Asia. The near-death experiences, as Hinton aptly suggests, connect conceptually with the activity of using the language, of writing, in that Scalapino radicalizes the text to the point of confronting the impossibility of any conventional articulation of limit experiences. In Kolozova’s theory, such radicalization operates as a reduction. To radicalize means to reduce the concept to “its ‘transcendental minimum’ or to the conceptual content that describes the workings of the real that have necessitated it (the concept)” (2014: 33). As both a conceptual and formal reworking of *King Lear*, *Zither* may be read as an instance of radicalization of the autobiographical mode. Conceptually, Lear’s fate describes the reality that he created and that created him, and by extension, one’s predicament as created internally and externally; formally, *Zither*’s form comes undone as its language is gradually diluted until it becomes reduced to isolated moments, or frames, of intense awareness and presence that remind us what this writing has been telling us in the first place; i.e.: that one constantly confronts the limit of the body and that of language.

As *Zither & Autobiography* show, Scalapino’s radicalization of the autobiographical mode is contingent upon the conceptual undoing of subjectivity. The fixed subject conceived according to normative parameters is replaced by “the tiny self” or “the small self”, as the poet explains in her essay on the American modernist poet H.D. (i.e.: Hilda Doolittle) (1993: 3). According to critics Frost

and Hogue, it is an “I” diminished by social pressure but not entirely degraded; an “I” that is returned to reality in the infinitely broader phenomenological perspective (1993: 3). “The tiny self” is central to Scalapino’s epistemology and to her phenomenologically oriented poetics of a radical recasting of subjectivity. In the poetry collection *New time*, one’s discursive entanglement is confronted with concrete, material aspects of one’s social condition, while the self is projected as continuously refigured under the pressures of economic forces and other life predicaments, such as poverty, death, discrimination, or the corporate order of late-capitalism; life under duress is what accounts for the self’s underlying integrity. For Scalapino, the subject’s capacity to survive in often inhuman conditions is what provides her with a sense of continuity, as is her being physically present in the events of life: “economic poverty (not being special) of them, is that being the physical body, per se. throughout. / which isn’t inner” (1999: 36). In Scalapino’s essay on H.D., on the other hand, “the tiny self” is brought into focus and viewed by the poet with a nearly utopian, if ironic, degree of certitude. “The tiny self” emerges as an instance of radicalization of identification; a reduction of subjectivity to its transcendental minimum that, far from reverting to essentialism or solipsism, reveals the workings of identity construction. It is a reminder of the subject’s integrity and continuity despite her condition of being positioned and repositioned in different life circumstances, the underlying structures of reality and the culture’s most radical investments: “At times all projections are one, the self, which are maintained separate; these are the form of the structure itself” (1993: 7). Scalapino’s “tiny self” could be approached as, to resort once more to Kolozova’s proposed nonstandard philosophical stance, “(t)he human in its last instance or the human-in-human is (the) real and the inexorably one. The one, as already said, is neither totalizing nor total. Rather, it is the minimal, the densest and irreducible quantity of the radical (or of pure immanence). It is not the universalizing one in the sense of the reductivist idea of a unity of differences either. It is the unique and solitary one” (2014: 250). In *Zither* (and other works of Scalapino) the word “one” is encountered with a telling frequency. As Monica Sirignano aptly observes in her review of this (2014: 53) work (2004), Scalapino’s repetition of the word “one” creates a sense of self-consciousness throughout *Zither*. The text, its characters, the speaker, and the author are aware, and I would add that the active state of heightened awareness of the solitary lived life radicalized into moments of being is what Scalapino conceptualizes most directly and insistently. Her writing does not postulate any form of collective consciousness; instead, self-consciousness as unilateral and belonging to the individual as a solitary person engaged in an ongoing internal conversation with herself rather than a dialogue with others is what provides a person with a sense of continuity. As Scalapino once said in an interview, writing is about “trying to explore the sense of what we are as a crowd, with the isolated, silent person perceiving in the

midst of that crowd. (...) [It] has something to do with that sense of being isolated from something, yet one never is; one's in the midst of it. But, precisely because of the form of the human mind, one is withdrawn from it, imitating it while one's doing it. That's why I was disagreeing with the notion of it being Platonic; because it's entirely the present-time action of what one is doing yet one is divided" (Brewster 2004).

The radicalized autobiographical mode as performative of the conceptual undoing of both genre and selfhood is continued in the 2003 experimental novel *Dahlia's iris: Secret autobiography and fiction*; the intergenre text that further blurs the lines between autobiography and fiction via engagement with two apparently incommensurate writing modes: Tibetan tradition of "secret autobiography" and detective fiction. The text incorporates elements of Tibetan Buddhism's practice, defined by Scalapino as "a form of attention as the mind's constructions by seeing these" (2003b: 15). The form of "secret autobiography" focuses on "one's life seeing" rather than outlining the chronology of one's life events. Additionally, the word "secret" denotes a shift from speaking and speaker to writing as an internal, solitary activity, which eschews social construction by being written before being read: "Secret is not spoken—not speaking the vision at the time of writing Secret Autobiography (not shared and thus not socially formed before being read) (2003b: 17). Scalapino's use of "secret autobiography" is directly related to the fundamental difference that she sees between writing as tradition and writing as practice; belonging to outside and inside, respectively. Writing as tradition (i.e.: the conservative impulse of cannon formation) belongs to the social realm, whereas writing as practice is internal and belongs to the individual. "Secret autobiography" unveils writing as a practice that is interior and does not belong to the social; however, it internalizes the social, which further problematizes the dualism of exteriority and interiority: "'Written' (in my Secret Autobiography) is to trace 'inner life' that interiorizes the outside. While that which is 'inner' can be recognized (even by oneself) only as the inverted image of 'exterior social way of speaking and seeing here'" (2003b: 17). *Dahlia's iris* is preoccupied with this specific mode of autobiographical writing as the only remaining probable "secret"; writing as a possibility of a conceptual revolution in society as both physically and conceptually oppressed while also conceptually creating the means of their own oppression. Via Walter Benjamin's persona of the flâneur juxtaposed with stock characters from *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Terminator 2*, *The Blade Runner*, and the figure of the champ from martial arts movies, Scalapino sees the demise of Benjamin's idea of decadent detachment as radically affecting the social power dynamics: "The flâneur, the detached stroller, no longer exists. Instead, individuals on all economic and class levels at once are both seeing and creating the 'conceptual' interaction that is them: which is then exterior, is 'society' (that is, the illusion of simultaneity). (...)

The written is ‘only conceptual’ ‘secret’—so it can only be outside of conceptually tyrannized social rule” (2003b: 55, original emphasis).

There is certainly a lot to be said about this multilayered complex work conceived as both a contained yet simultaneously projective structure; a multi-genre work perversely defined by Scalapino as a novel “with internal streamers streaming off of it” (2003b: 15). *Dahlia’s iris* deploys a radicalized version of the (secret) autobiography mode through which we come to recognize the tyranny of the social occurring at the exact moment of its construction in consciousness. Among the many possible points of entry to *Dahlia’s iris*, the radicalization of the autobiographical mode as seen through the lens of Kolozova’s understanding of the radical concept may serve as a helpful way of unpacking at least some of the text’s “internal streamers”, in particular those that relate to the acutely ambivalent dynamics that Scalapino mobilizes around the perennial Western dualisms of outside and inside, reality and fiction (as well as outside as internalized and reality as fictionalized) as the basis of radicalization as thinking in radical terms with radical concepts, which is what Kolozova calls (via Laruelle’s thought) thinking according to “the syntax of the real” (Kolozova 2014: 155). A reading of *Dahlia’s iris* through the lens of Kolozova’s nonstandard philosophical theorization of subjectivity demonstrates the way in which Scalapino addresses the pitfalls of Occidental, both metaphysical and post-metaphysical, tradition of thought, specifically regarding subjectivity and the real, not only by problematizing the unitary subjectivity and dualistic thought as foundations of Western philosophy but also by engaging elements of Eastern thought, specifically the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of non-hierarchical thinking via the form of “secret autobiography”. While Kolozova, via Laruelle, proposes a posture thought that does not pretend to be able to rehabilitate the real, I argue that Scalapino is similarly preoccupied with forging her poetics thinking in terms of the real as “the task of understanding a singular reality that is solitary in its radicality” (Kolozova 2014: 251). Kolozova explains her speculative realist approach as “a gesture of thought that correlates with the real while it simultaneously affirms its ultimate evasion of language and thought. It’s a kind of thinking that recognizes the uncompromising and uncontrollable rule of an ungraspable real behind the reality it aspires to explain” (2014: 139). The emergent non-position proposed by Kolozova rests on the ability to think the real and fiction in their radical singularity, rather than their mutual relationality (2014: 139). “The syntax of the real”, as Kolozova further argues via Laruelle, assumes: 1) “the Vision-in-one”, i.e.: thinking in terms of the singular and the real that involves “oneness and radicalness in the sense of non-relatedness and immanence” as “defining constituents of (...) nondichotomous thinking” (2014: 156), and 2) “Identity in the last instance”, which becomes another name for the real defined as the unique and concrete instances of the real, such as for example determinations of “labor force” or “victim” that are never abstractions

or generalizations (2014: 332-3). This brings me directly to discussing Scalapino's position in *Dahlia's iris*, which deploys the esoteric genre of the Tibetan "secret autobiographical" mode; a text that stages a vision of subjectivity ensconced between the fictional and the actual.

Dahlia's iris emerges as an enactment of the radicalization of the literary technique of realism and simultaneously a text that examines the status of fiction vis-à-vis that of the real not in the sense of reiterating their interrelatedness, but, quite the opposite, thematizing the problematization of positing such dualism and turning instead to the investigation of their singular, radical condition. It is not a coincidence that Scalapino chooses realism for her formal experiments. The text acts as a simulacrum of the realist convention; Scalapino explains that it is "not based on realism but on repetition. It is a detective novel, a form which depends on realism only—but maybe repetition of that convention and of events will make a crack, will crack realism" (2003b: 24). She installs its axis as a murder mystery; detective fiction throughout which we learn about a group of San Francisco detectives investigating the mysterious killings of Hispanic boys brought to the city as a cheap labor force. The victims' bodies are discovered with jacks implanted in their necks, poignantly suggestive of the brutality of inhuman mechanisms of control underlying some corporate or political conspiracy. Scalapino consistently conceptualizes the outside as the social with its totalizing and absolute rule over the individual's inner life continually infiltrated by the tyrannical outside or at risk of interiorizing the outside. The choice of the murder mystery genre is not motivated by the desire for events as productive of action in the conventional sense, but rather occasions a language-oriented investigative framework in which the characters' movements are considered in terms of their being inside the events or seeing events as these events are being shaped in time by the social mechanisms of America's advanced capitalism, the country's racial and labor politics, as well as its relentless military agenda: "Instant isn't a unit as we construct it socially, is: as only instant of relativity — which is also there impression of a life. Can only be seen. / No, can be felt. The boys who are the imported labor, slaves or indentured servants — are when seen in their DNA — outside any human lineage. They don't know this yet" (2003b: 89). Scalapino's treatment of the categories of inside and outside as related to the question of identity and the victims' subalternity (i.e.: a position without identity) brings to mind terms and arguments of Kolozova. *Dahlia's iris* postulates a conceptual space where the radical singularity of one's condition in the world and vis-à-vis the real are addressed in an immanent and concrete way. The characters in *Dahlia's iris* do not form any kind of community; the relationships between them are somewhat mechanical and largely inconsequential, whereas their intimate encounters are reduced to disaffected descriptions evocative of the genre of erotica. As in the case of the poet's other writings, there is no collective consciousness that could be postulated here;

instead, Scalapino is primarily preoccupied with the protagonists' character as a figure for articulating her position on identity and writing, in order to grasp the relation of the people's character to action unfolding in singular temporal frames, to apprehend the real as captured in our singular fragments, moments, and frames of being, as Scalapino puts it, "to see the relation of character of people and the present instant, in every instant. That is, seeing character while (or as part of) continually staying on tracking every present instant. Even trying to track every instant changes an instant" (2003b: 32).

While Scalapino conceptualizes the outside as fully socially determined, the notions of the inside and inner life are mobilized in the text through a recourse to the tradition of "secret autobiography" that focuses on one's life, and becomes Scalapino's vehicle for establishing the relationship between action and the mind. Scalapino's recourse to "secret autobiography", therefore, emerges as a form that on the one hand tries to reclaim the notion of unassailable interiority, but on the other hand problematizes such a notion, retracing the genealogy of the genre and its present day scholarly reception. Scalapino criticizes Janet Gyatso's argument from the 1998 *Apparitions of the self: The secret autobiographies of a Tibetan visionary*, where the author applies Western materialist logic to expose the genre of secret autobiography as contrived and careerist by showing that those who wrote them as visionary practice actually did it in order to make their stories resonate for future readers. This dynamic is explored most fully in *Dahlia's iris* in the chapter "Terminator". In this section, Scalapino performs an analysis of this classic science fiction movie directed by James Cameron (the original 1984 *Terminator* as well as the 1991 *Terminator 2: Judgement day*), via occasional reference to *The invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and a meditation on "secret autobiography." In Scalapino's reading of the movie, treated as a "cultural abstraction" that fictionally projects America's actual fear of the ultimate destruction of human kind by machines, the character of Sarah Connor, John Connor's taunted mother, emerges as a radical figure likened to a Tibetan lama who remains in the state of a "continual conceptual rebellion" even in the face of torture and mockery from society "which has only outside" (2003b: 109; 108). Scalapino writes: "Terminator 2 implies ridding (or understanding) oneself of (as) social ego which is only outside. (...) there is no leaving because the society has spread everywhere / whereas 'continual conceptual rebellion' is the only route devised so far to existing. (...)" (2003b: 109-10). Thus, the "secret autobiography" form effects of a radical, even if only theoretical, separation of the outer and inner; the physiological and the conceptual: "'Theorizing oneself' as body that is conceptual (such as seeing within the body, not on the eye's retina (...)) — is reversing the imaginary. Imitating the 'body's conceptualization' (there is no wholeness, only conceptual) is disruption" (2003b: 131).

For the reader, to be sure, Scalapino's radical way of conceptualizing autobiography as completely derealized; i.e.: severed from its conventionally conceived subject and form may indeed seem hermetic. Such a radicalization of the autobiographical mode in Scalapino's work serves as an immanent critique of the genre that performs the crucial work of analyzing cultural formations by tracing contradictory patterns in the systems and rules necessary to the production of these formations, trying to get to the roots of language where it becomes a threateningly colonizing discourse, and, finally, to resort once more to Kolozova's language "questioning the content and mechanisms of autoconstitution and autolegitimization inherent in founding conceptual constructs" (2014: 53).

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