

## Autobiographical Language Poetry and the Contesting of Textual Authority in Scholarship: Reading the Letters of Leslie Scalapino and Marjorie Perloff

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### レスリー・スカルピーノとマジョリー・パーロフとの書簡交換における詩人と研究者との間の本文の典拠と緊張状態

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#### Abstract

Through an analysis of an unpublished letter exchange between the late Leslie Scalapino and Marjorie Perloff, I explore the ramifications of scholarly authority as it intersects with authorial intention in autobiographical Language poetry. In 1998, Perloff published an article that included a short reading of a 1976 Scalapino poem. Scalapino disagreed with Perloff's analysis, particularly in the way that the latter "reordered the intention." The disagreement resulted in a three-letter exchange between the two and a long essay by Scalapino, in which she considered the constructedness of experience and the ways in which her resistance against that constructedness in her poetry was, in her mind, misread. My analysis of the letter exchange and the essay shows that scholars of poetry cannot be easily grouped in the same category as casual readers since the institutional authority backing their "readings" maintains the social hierarchy that poets like Scalapino have deliberately worked against.

**Keywords:** Leslie Scalapino, Marjorie Perloff, Language poetry, autobiography, archival research

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#### Marjorie Perloff, Language Poetry, and *hmmmm*

In 1998, scholar Marjorie Perloff published an essay in *Quarry West* titled "The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer: The Case of Ron Silliman." Part of her project in this essay was to question some of the key definitions of "Language poetry" that had been in circulation for a few decades. According to these definitions, the general

poetics of Language poetry included a resistance to the notion of the coherent, lyrical voice, language disruptions designed to reveal the constructedness of the language medium, and the idea that formal resistance at the level of the word was an integral part of any general social resistance. In her essay, Perloff primarily analyzes Ron Silliman's autobiographical poem *Under Albany*. Silliman sent a copy of it to Scalapino, as a segment of her 1976 book *hmmmm* was briefly treated as a point of comparison

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with Silliman, along with a few other Language poets involved in autobiographical projects. After reading the essay, Scalapino sent Perloff a letter, and the ensuing exchange (one response from Perloff and a follow-up letter from Scalapino), which is available in the Special Collections at the University of California, San Diego, shows the degree to which issues of authority, selfhood, and readership are inextricably bound together in Scalapino's writing. In what follows I will analyze that letter exchange and Scalapino's essay "Seamless Antilandscapes," which grew out of the exchange.<sup>i</sup> This analysis shows that when scholars give institutionally sanctioned readings of autobiographical texts, particularly when those texts resist the clarity of definition, they risk reinscribing the very hierarchies of social control and conformity the authors were working against in the first place. My analysis of the texts that reveal this tension treats only a very small portion of Scalapino's exploration of these issues, and is meant to be the beginning of a larger project.<sup>ii</sup>

Briefly, Perloff's main argument in her 1998 essay is that though Language poetry had long been construed as an attempt to develop a poetics without the confessional, autobiographical voice that had so dominated poetry of the sixties and seventies, Silliman's poem "does express the poet's world, does describe a life—and does so very graphically and movingly. Despite Silliman's evident desire to subvert the autobiographical, the confessional, in keeping with Language poetics, the urge is to express" (Perloff, "The Portrait"). Perloff supports this claim by showing that Silliman's autobiographical, lyrical "voice" can clearly be distinguished from the autobiographical voices of other Language poets. To demonstrate this comparison, she offers brief extracts and very brief readings of three other poets associated with Language poetry: Michael Palmer, Barrett Watten, and Scalapino. Perloff does not use these poets' works in order to make a deliberate statement about their contributions to the field of autobiographical Language poetry, and in fact her attention to each occupies only two paragraphs per poet, hardly a claim to any sort of definitive reading, and certainly not an argument about the nature of the poetics at play. Her descriptions of Scalapino's segment from *hmmmm* mostly operate as a comparison to Silliman's voice. While Silliman's

text is lodged quite firmly in what seems to be a stable, material world experienced by the author, Scalapino's, though also structured by an "I" who perceives and shapes the text, presents "the uncanny and terrifying substrate of ordinary life" (Perloff, "The Portrait").

Throughout Scalapino's *hmmmm*, women and men who are encountered by the speaker are described in the language of animals: neighing, whinnying, yipping, "the yelp of a young dog" (to describe a woman's sounds during sex), muzzles, barking, seals, haunches, baboons, and so on. Generally, the people are not actually portrayed as *being* animals. Rather, both the speaker and the other people use animals as a way to describe others and as a way to conceptualize and shape their experiences. However, the frequent animal language creates the sense that we are not quite in this world here, but in some other world where the distinction between the human and the non-human has broken down. The lyrical subject's phenomenal perceptions function not only as impressions, but as aspects of a fully creative process, dislocating readers from their own phenomenally created worlds: "Well, before I knew it...[a woman] put her snout down into her glass...and began dipping her milk up with her tongue"; "So I decided watching an *old* woman like her, who could rise so easily / on her hind legs, on her haunches... / that women can also be satyrs"; "in undressing a man...I undress him simply by thinking about the way he walks / as being the way a baboon walks (slowly) on his hind legs / with his tail erect."

Scalapino's own description of *hmmmm* provides a helpful inroad to the work. In her November 30, 1998, letter to Perloff, she describes it as composed of "segments" that "were intended to be breakdowns of prior constructions of events—but also were very free pleasure as convolution of humor" (Letter [30 Nov.]). That is, the text is meant, it seems, to break and twist not prior events, but rather whatever way the human mind had previously created those events *as events*. The poet, presumably, experienced something outside of herself, something involving her and being affected by her involvement, and then constructed the event phenomenally in her mind. The segments of her poem function as a way to deconstruct the prior phenomenal construction, which is the only remainder of the event, there being

nothing outside of that construction. Yet throughout, the forms of perception are multiplied and layered on top of each other, so that the speaker's perceptions merge with those of the other characters.

The segment that Perloff cites in her essay recounts the speaker's rather scary encounter with a woman while riding on a bus:

How was I to know that the woman, seated next to me on the bus, would, when the bus lurched, just appear to lose her balance, and, as if to keep herself from swaying, would take hold of my arm like that with her hand, so that, pressing me very hard between her finger and thumb, she actually pinched my arm. What pain. However, I believed (looking at her sideways, and seeing only that her lips were parted slightly, with her snout breathing softly in and out) that during the two to three minutes in which this pain lasted, far from her being simply mean to me, she was actually saying (or at least I imagined so from the length of time that she lingered over my arm before releasing me) *I wish that I could make you yelp just once.*

In comparison to Silliman's text, which Perloff describes as "disjointed," "jaunty," "upbeat despite the constant difficulties he faces," Scalapino's text is described by the scholar as "seamless" and "flat," and the woman on the bus is described as having a "malignant, animal quality." Again, instead of using these qualities to make an authoritative, critical judgment about Scalapino's work, Perloff uses her text, along with Palmer's and Watten's, only as a foil to Silliman's.

Yet, despite the rather minor role her own work ultimately played in the overall thrust of Perloff's article, Scalapino took great umbrage at the scholar's interpretation of her poem. Her overall critique has to do with what she considers to be Perloff's mischaracterization of her intentionality as author. This assault on intentionality can be broken into two categories: Perloff's rendering of Scalapino's text as "seamless" and of the speaker as "hysterical." As I mentioned above, Scalapino's response to Perloff can be found in two places: the

*published* essay "Seamless Antilandscape" and two *unpublished* letters sent by Scalapino to Perloff shortly after reading the original essay. Ultimately, I think her multiple responses to Perloff are revelatory of not only her work in and of itself, which can be difficult to describe at times, but also of her troubled perception of authorial and scholarly authority over a given text. I'll focus on the essay first, as it offers a fuller, more carefully planned enunciation of Scalapino's ideas, and then examine the letters, including Perloff's response.

### Seamlessness and Hysteria: Scalapino's Response

In "Seamless Antilandscape," Scalapino explains that *hmmmm*'s segment was in fact based on a 1974 dream she had which itself was based on an event from her childhood in which a woman (in her letter she identifies this woman as her grandmother) really did pinch her arm while staring deliberately into her eyes.<sup>iii</sup> She explains that the writing was not simply a recounting of an event, or even an imaginative retelling of an event. Rather, she writes, "The writing is a 'collapsing' of the distinction between real events and dreams, because my intention was to look at what's happening in the mind *then* ('real time?')—also I was looking at the mind in its relation to the real outside (*not* that the outside has created the mind...or that the mind has created the outside)" (269). She is not expressing a past experience, or even her perception of a past experience. No, Scalapino's intention, it seems, is that her writing *is* the collapsing between event and dream, is itself the mind in the process of noticing the world around it. The woman and her cruelty are outside of the speaker, yet Scalapino explains that in the telling of the dream, she was not describing it or the woman, as when something is described it is "already constructed" "in memory" (270), and part of her project is to write in a way that is prior to construction and that reveals the "seams" at play in narrative writing. The "seams" can perhaps be best revealed by recounting the full sequence of events, noting that each subsequent recounting indicates a "constructed" experience, shaped by the adult Scalapino's phenomenal rendering of it:

- Childhood event: "My grandmother removed

my hand from hers, and placing her fingers on my arm dug into my arm pinching it with her fingers and nails as hard as she could; while causing me excruciating pain she gazed into my face gleefully” (*Zither & Autobiography* 25). This experience gave Scalapino “one of [her] first ‘adult perceptions: ‘If I can recognize that this [her pinching me] is not human, I must have been given the idea of something that *is* human’” (Letter to Perloff [30 Nov.]).

- 1974 dream: referenced the childhood event, including the perception about what is and is not human, yet qualified and constructed as memory by Scalapino’s adult experiences: “the dream indicating to assess the conception [of what a human is] *then* (as in the end and aftermath of the Vietnam War, people there, people on the streets here—the overt and thus violent discrimination against all the women, ridiculed as a group in front of my classes, in graduate school—transgression of friendship in love constituting abandoning...these events occurring at the same time). The dream is indicating not concurring with any of these constructions, or *any* constructions” (“Seamless Antilandscapes” 269-270).
- Segment from *hmmmm*: intended as a way to work against the constructions of her prior experiences, that is, her interpretation of the 1974 events—Vietnam protests, graduate school gender discrimination, and so on—as being further indications of what is or is not human; “[the segments] were intended to be breakdowns of prior constructions of events—in so far as we were being crushed out, and ‘we’ were interiorly, one could be in small motions that are ‘taken out of’ thought—a motion that is not denying thought or as it” (“Seamless Antilandscapes” 270).

Scalapino’s intention in writing of this event-inspired dream, then, is to be “outside” or “prior” to the construction of events, which she links with social control. This “outside” is what gives her text, in her mind, “seams,” in that she means for us to consider the processes by which we construct events as what we perceive them to be. But, for her, “perspective itself is impermanence” (270) and her writing attempts to show that impermanence by creating

a perspective that is fully *outside* of constructed experience: “I wanted experience as ‘reading’ that is ‘outside.’ And cannot be anywhere else but outside that” (270). By being outside of constructed experience, then, Scalapino sees herself and her text as participating in a sort of radical project that “could never be within acceptability” (270) and, importantly, shows that any perception of a narrative as a “whole” is misguided: “that ‘critique’ might be ‘procedures’ as structuring, for example, that call into question narratives as ‘whole’ so if one views that critique as a necessity (which I do) to be ‘seamless’ is to have failed. So it becomes an entity. Oneself (or the writing?) is seen to be only rendering a ‘whole narrative’ which one is in” (271).

The segment from *hmmmm*, then, is an attempt at disrupting the way that social convention can and does contribute to our constructions of events (war protests as defining humanity in any way, for example). This for Scalapino reveals a “seam,” one that shows that narratives of all kinds, whether simple stories or constructions of selves, cannot be the whole sum. Seams reveal stitches, and thus reveal places where the narrative can be either carefully or violently torn apart. With this understanding of the seam in mind, Scalapino’s fierce resistance to Perloff’s characterization of her work as “seamless” makes sense.

The other major point of contention for Scalapino was Perloff’s use of the word “hysterical” to describe the speaker of the poem. In her understanding, the term “hysteria” focuses acutely on the perceiving mind—the “I” of the poem—and distracts from what is outside the speaker. Scalapino considers that such an interior focus creates “a sense of the world being fine but not the one noticing it” (269). But what is particularly frustrating for Scalapino, is that since the perceiving “I” does not seem to be “right,” “hysteria’s” long use as a pejorative word to describe overly emotional women compromises Scalapino’s poetics of social resistance—if she is truly hysterical, the “I” is merely crazy, not subversive. Scalapino considered her poem inherently feminist because it does not “proceed as doctrine” or “accept social custom.” That is, the *intention* of the work is to “take ‘one’ outside of socially controlled exchange” (270). Calling the voice hysterical, then, mitigates the resistance by reinscribing social control

via sexist language and stripping away intentionality in favor of uncontrolled emotion: “to call this surface ‘hysteria’ is to limit it by regarding it as nonintentional, which intention was to cut past that limiting itself, that barrier of social definition (that is acting as a lid of violence) itself” (270). Perloff’s charge of “hysteria” is intensified by a bit of slippage in her terms as well. In her brief analysis she notes that “her mind’s not right.” But to whom does “her” refer? In the paragraph in which this sentence falls, Perloff refers to the speaker of the poem once as “the narrator,” once as “the ‘I,’” and twice as “the poet.” Is Perloff calling the speaker hysterical? Or Scalapino? And in an essay about autobiography, in which Silliman and Palmer are referred to as themselves (Watten uses a third person narrator), Scalapino can’t quite be blamed for bristling at the charge of hysteria.

### Authority and Intention: The Letter Exchange

As I explained above, Scalapino’s essay “Seamless Antilandscapes” was not the first time the author had worked through her ideas in response to Perloff’s essay. She had already written them down in two private letters to Perloff, sent shortly after reading the essay. In fact, seven paragraphs from the essay have been taken verbatim from the two letters. The first letter was sent on November 30, 1998. In it, Scalapino basically lays out the ways in which Perloff has, in her understanding, misread the poet’s text. She expresses considerable disagreement, as she does in “Seamless Antilandscapes,” with the description of her work as “seamless” and her narrator as “hysterical.” Further, she notes that *hmmmm* came out of a very early work (1976), while the texts by the three male authors came from later texts, a move that she calls “implicitly dismissive” toward her own writing. She concludes the letter with a quite scathing charge of Perloff’s article being a “*really* poor reading on your part” (Letter [30 Nov.]) and links it conceptually to the way that she had been dismissed by male Language poets over the years. In her second letter, dated December 10, 1998, she refrains from any angry language, and notes that when writing the first letter “I wasn’t so much angry as overwhelmed” (Letter [10 Dec.]). She

explains herself a little more carefully throughout, and notes twice, at the beginning and end, that she is not angry and just wants to clarify the situation. She adds a postscript to this letter with a dictionary definition of hysteria in order to show that it is linked exclusively to women.<sup>iv</sup>

On December 4, 1998, Perloff wrote a response to Scalapino expressing surprise at the poet’s anger. In it, she responds one by one to the issues raised. I will focus on a few that deal with issues of identity—namely, the identity of the speaker in the poem, and the identity of the reader of the poem. For example, in response to Scalapino’s dislike of her speaker being called hysterical, Perloff writes: “The misunderstanding is that you seem to think I am talking about Leslie Scalapino whereas I am talking about the woman in the poem—surely a different thing! It never even occurred to me to think of it as autobiographical in that one-to-one way” (Letter [4 Dec.]). As I’ve explained, this “one-to-one” identification is a quite plausible reading of Perloff’s essay, as she slips back and forth between “poet” and “speaker” as a way to identify the “I” in Scalapino’s text. Further, as Scalapino pointed out in her letter, her own poem was placed alongside more clearly autobiographical—in Philip Lejeune’s sense<sup>v</sup>—poems, thus creating a group of similarly shaped works, leading Perloff’s readers to likely assume that Scalapino’s “I” points to the same sort of person as Silliman’s “I.”

But Perloff’s letter brings up another issue that we must consider. When we read her letter to Scalapino explaining herself, who does her own “I” point to? The answer cannot here be as simple as “Marjorie Perloff.” Though that is true, it is only partially true. Does the “I” of the letter refer to Marjorie Perloff the *reader*, or Marjorie Perloff the *eminent scholar of Modernism and Postmodernism*? The distinction, I will argue, is crucial to understanding the ramifications of the textual exchanges we see at work here. Because we read Perloff’s “I” in a private letter not originally meant for publication, we can reasonably assume that when she refers to herself, she refers to her private, readerly self. This self is one who expects to be able to read as she chooses, simply because she is a reader: “What does disturb me is that you seem to feel there’s one right reading—yours. This would



seem to go against everything I thought you believe in. Does the poet own the poem once it's out there? Surely you don't believe that?" (Letter [4 Dec.]). This private self also is the emotional self, responding quite honestly to Scalapino's rather harsh charge of the essay being a "*really* poor reading": "perhaps you should [bear] in mind that even academic critics have feelings" (Letter [4 Dec.]). For Perloff, this sort of emotional, private self—wholly appropriate to a personal letter—must be very unlike the public self usually put forth by scholars, where challenges are to be met with logic, argument, evidence, and spirited debate.

One difference between the *reader* (emotional, private) and the *scholar* (rational, public) that will help us contextualize this discussion further is the different ways that each are endowed with authority and, from that authority, responsibility. Readers who consider themselves readers alone bear little responsibility to find a "right" reading. As such, the author's intention has only as much impact on a reading as the reader cares to give it. When Perloff asks in her letter, "Does the poet own the poem once it's out there?", this is what she is referring to. As a *reader*, she can do what she wishes with Scalapino's poem. She can read it to be about Leslie or not, to be based on fact or not; she can plagiarize it into her own private writings or forget it immediately. The *reader's* authority and the *poet's* authority do not here mix. Yet, as soon as Perloff wrote about the poem in a published essay, she ceased being a reader only and took on her public self, now becoming a *scholar*. This shift greatly expands the reach of her authority, and at three points in this letter exchange, that authority is subtly acknowledged. First, in Scalapino's initial letter, she accuses Perloff of using the word "seamless" to dismiss her work in the same way that "male language poets" have dismissed her work over the years (Letter [30 Nov.]).<sup>vi</sup> Second, when Perloff responds to the charge of having dismissed the work, she writes that "Nothing could be further from the truth as you should know from all the recs etc I've written over the years" (Letter [4 Dec.]). Here, though I cannot comment on Perloff's intention in referencing these recommendations, she does call to mind the authority that, in the past, she has used to help further Scalapino's own career. Should Scalapino have been grateful and thus have

forgotten her frustrations? Finally, in Scalapino's second letter, she explains why exactly she bristled so violently at Perloff's use of the word "hysteria" to describe her work: "to say that my writing is 'barely controlled hysteria' simply conveys to an 'outsider' or beginning reader that they should definitely steer clear (volatile)—and it is not to be trusted, it's neurotic. That it's not an alert intentionality—as if (it/I'm) not aware as conscious endeavor" (Letter [10 Dec.]). That is, the *scholar* has not only power to read and interpret, but also to *create new readers*. How many quality writers over the centuries have been lost to a reading public because some scholar dismissed their work? How many college syllabi have helped make or break a poet or novelist? Scalapino here seems to be expressing her fear that her own writing will be lost to the dusty university library stacks if scholars with real, tangible power in the field mis-read her texts or mis-characterize her intentions.

This issue of intentionality is at the heart of Scalapino's response to Perloff's essay. "She is reordering the intention" (274), she writes in "Seamless Antilandscapes," later arguing that Perloff does the same thing to Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. For Scalapino, intention is connected inescapably to one's experiences, and when scholars of poetry dismiss an author's experience in favor of procedural form or "lineage," they are actually asserting power over the text and diminishing whatever radical form the poet conceived: "Critical writing embracing a type of contemporary poetry (much of) which has a radical conceptual and social-political intention, sometimes deemphasizes or 'changes' the poets' intentions... This tends to bring the poet into lineage as socially 'understandable' and understandable in that it is literary tradition" (272). Further, "The academic prescription of *lineage* as basis of critique is a structural transformation of the individual's oeuvre. That is, lineage *is* 'chronic strategies of authorial domination'" (273). Overall, Scalapino is accusing Perloff of having manipulated her passage—by isolating a segment, by ignoring seams, by only examining her juvenilia—in order to make a scholarly argument, an accusation to which Perloff admits quite plainly in her letter,<sup>vii</sup> and something which is necessary and standard for all literary scholarship. Scalapino's intentionality regarding

her own work, then, has been compromised. It is no longer Scalapino's authorial intention or Perloff's merely readerly intention, neither of which, as I argued above, necessarily assert power over the other, the latter depending as it does on knowledge that is unnecessary for a reading experience. Instead, Perloff's scholarly intention has entered the field, bringing with it all the power so assumed: the power to create new readers, the power to establish lineage, the power to canonize.

### Conclusion: The Institution and the Self

At the end of *hmmmm* is an epilogue of eight additional segments. One segment in particular exemplifies the stakes for Scalapino in this struggle for intentional authority. The third segment begins with the words of a man who is being quoted by the speaker, though very quickly the identity of the speaker is muddled by a swapping of pronouns: "One night, running after her thru the park', the man said to me / (and he kept using the word 'her' tho he was actually referring to me)." The speaker's emphasis here on the strangeness of being referred to as "her" in the middle of a two-person conversation problematizes the idea that "I" in the poem could simply refer to an unnamed, un-personed lyrical subject (which, recall, Perloff claimed to be her interpretation of the speaking voice). This problem is brought to a head at the end of the segment, when the man finishes telling what seems to be a dream: "Meanwhile, I was running (altho it seemed like / floating) with my head thrown back, and calling out very loudly LESLIE." Though the insertion of the author's name into the narrative spot reserved for the "I" is not a guarantee that the Lejeunian autobiographical pact has been fulfilled, it does complicate that identity, retroactively rendering each preceding "I" a possible stand-in for Leslie Scalapino the person and not merely, as Perloff had suggested, just a faceless "speaker." And therein lies one of the unique challenges of developing scholarship about works by Leslie Scalapino. Part of her technique is to develop autobiographical texts without being explicit about the nature of such texts and thereby the identity of the speaking voice(s). This is performed in a variety of ways, such as blending autobiography with fiction and substituting third-person pronouns

for first-person pronouns. The scholar of Scalapino's work, who, like Perloff, makes a seemingly objective judgment about the mental state of a speaker or something that, in fiction or lyrical poetry, would be quite benign, now risks making that judgment about Scalapino herself. And though the scholar, again like Perloff, may have no way of knowing that Scalapino intended the voice of the poem to be her own, the scholar's *authority* to make such claims over the text—over the author's self and identity—is maintained. Defining the nature of the *text* now becomes defining the autobiographical *self* with institutional authority backing up said definition. The self, then, becomes subject to institutional power in a way never intended and indeed actively resisted.

I have not attempted here to offer a definitive (scholarly) reading of Scalapino's sense of dislocated and anti-institutional selfhood as displayed across her numerous texts, though such a reading deserves to be performed. Nor have I attempted to judge whether Scalapino or Perloff "won" their exchange. Rather, I hope that this article has outlined some of the paths that must be navigated by institutionally supported authoritative scholars when dealing with formally experimental language. When autobiographical poets reject the confessional voice in favor of a voice made seemingly foreign through narrative and syntactical disruptions, the sense of self they have intended in the work is at risk of dissipating into a flurry of readerly perceptions they cannot know and cannot control. Scholars must consider the power they hold when dealing with such texts, even when their scholarship is intended as active support and exploration of this resistance.

- i) "Seamless Antilandscapes" was originally published as a 1999 chapbook from Spectacular Books, and then a year later as part of Scalapino's 2000 book *R-hu* (Atelos). It was republished in 2011 (after Scalapino's death but under her editorial direction) in the updated collection *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* (originally published in 1989 by Potes & Poets Press; the 2011 version was published by Litmus). I will refer to the 2011 version of "Seamless Antilandscapes" for pagination, as

*How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* is perhaps the most easily accessible of the three versions and contains a number of other vital essays by the author.

- ii) Research for this article was funded by a 2015 Meio University Research Institute New Faculty Grant.
- iii) In 2003, Scalapino recounted this memory again in an explicitly autobiographical text, *Zither & Autobiography* (25).
- iv) Her note reads: “The Greek notion that hysteria was peculiar to women and caused by disturbances of the uterus. A psychoneurosis marked by emotional excitability and disturbances of the psychic, sensory, vasomotor, and visceral functions. Behavior marked by this” (Letter [10 Dec.]).
- v) Lejeune’s famous definition of autobiography is “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). Further, he outlined what can be called an “autobiographical pact,” in which the author, narrator, and protagonist of the text must be identical, referring to the same historical person (5).
- vi) An example of such a dismissal is recounted by Scalapino in her essay “The Cannon” from *The Public World/Syntactically Impermanence*. During a public reading, Scalapino read a passage that referenced “an overlay itself of seeing an impression (image) of blue dye on the surface of the eye only.” She recounts an encounter with a man following the reading:

“A man speaking to me afterward referred only to the reference, in the writing, to the dye: *‘that sounds like something that happened to you,’ with the implication tonally as well as in mentioning only that point in the writing, it is thus inferior*

*or that its happening explains the whole away.*

*it invalidates it by being experience.”*  
(18)

Having opened the essay with another anecdote in which a man informed an

audience that she did not embody Gertrude Stein’s “human mind,” but that she was “merely human nature,” (15) we can see here her defensiveness at being possibly unfavorably compared to men, especially regarding her own intention toward her writing.

- vii) Perloff writes, “all I was doing in this instance was noting how silly it is to talk about ‘language poetry’ as if it were all identical when of course individual poets are very different and have their own signatures. The reason I chose that segment has nothing to do with its status as early or late but because I was looking for subject matter being similar so that the differences would stand out” (Letter [4 Dec.]). To all accounts this is a benign rationale for the comparisons, but it is, nevertheless, a manipulation of a poet’s work to serve the argumentative needs of the scholar.

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