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[P]ain is nonlinguistic: It is what we human beings have that ties us to the non-language-using beasts. So victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of a language. That is why there is no such things as the "voice of the oppressed" or the "language of the victims." The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else.

Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 94

American avant-garde author Leslie Scalapino described her acclaimed 1988 serial poem *way* as a text devoted primarily to the theme of homelessness. Explored most directly in the section entitled “bum series,” homelessness emerges for the poet as a concrete, material condition of social exclusion that puts the individual in a situation of victimization and deprivation that turns out to be life-threatening. Making a question of poetic response to homelessness a recurring concern in her writing, Scalapino explains the intention of the poem in following terms in her later 1996 work *The Front Matter, Dead Souls*:

In a poem I wrote, *way*, I wanted compassion objectively *to be* in the moving shape there, as the form in the series—pressed in its moving of shape in the real events. It occurs not subject to one and outside of one. / I was trying to get a shape, which is in some way a sound, that’s movement in location, and is also compassion by itself (objectively) occurring (*not* imposed) in these locations. / The writing is the minute moving or shape of a real event. Sentiment has no relation to existence. It isn’t an act?” (21, original emphasis)

In *way*, Scalapino does not reflect on homelessness, but rather creates a site where both the author and the reader must confront the difficulty of grasping with the material reality of, to use Judith Butler’s term, the homeless person’s “derealized” position.¹ Scalapino’s work problematizes the poetic task of forging an ethical response to homelessness, on the one hand pointing to concrete aspects of the person’s circumstance and the ways in which it directly threatens their lives (e.g. homeless individuals freezing to death), and on the other hand engaging with the problem of inadequacy of any conceptual treatment of homelessness, investigating perspectives inherent in one’s construction of its condition.

In this brief paper, I focus on *way*’s section “bum series” and contend that its minimalist poetics radically re-examines the ways in which homelessness is engaged both in poetic language and social space. Whereas the poem is evocative of Rorty’s claim that victims are deprived of language and his suggestion that poets may be the ones with a special mandate and ability to put one’s suffering into language, Scalapino enacts in writing the very impossibility of this task, simultaneously speculating on the possibility of arriving at a form capable of objective and non-perspectival scrutiny. In doing so, she attempts to forge a radical form of response that does not pretend to speak for the other or in any way rely on the poet’s authority and privilege. Rather, the poem becomes a critical space where both the author and the reader must remain conflicted and become aware of the risks involved in their attempts to formulate a response. The poet shows that suffering and pain are unrepresentable. They are material and as such irreducible to representational language. Consequently, the poem forgoes representation and relies on a different mode of articulation, foregrounding the movement of language that fosters active engagement rather than relies on any conventional portrayal.

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¹ Cf. Butler’s use of the term “derealization” in her 2004 *Undoing Gender*. Butler uses the term in the political context to speak of particular groups of individuals that become “unreal” through exclusion and silencing, and I extend its use to the situation of the homeless to convey a sense of their alienation and subaltern position.

The discursive inability to speak of the other's suffering has been recently addressed by the founder of the so called non-standard philosophy François Laruelle. It is in contrast to his essay *General Theory of Victims* that I propose to approach Scalapino's language-oriented experimental text as a radicalized poetics of scrutiny.² According to Laruelle's non-standard thinking, radicalization is understood as both abstraction and subsequent reduction of a concept to its minimal transcendental (i.e. linguistic) content necessary for the unveiling of the mechanism that gave rise to the auto-legitimization of a particular concept. Such radicalization, according to one of Laruelle's commentators philosopher Katerina Kolozova, aims at "getting to the roots of the discourse that has become one's theoretical inertia" (*Cut of the Real* 53). I argue that "bum series" shows a specific form of engagement that can be encountered in many of Scalapino's other writings, such as *Defoe*, *The Front Matter*, *Dead Souls*, as well as *The Return of Painting*, *The Pearl*, and *Orion: a Trilogy*, and that could be approached *vis-à-vis* Laruelle's radicalized concept of the victim. As I am about to show, even though Scalapino shares Laruelle's preoccupation with the philosophical insufficiency of any available discourse on suffering ("bum series" indeed departs from a position similar to Laruelle's concern for the victim), her nonnarrative and non-representational writing emerges as much more nuanced and concrete in accounting for the mechanism of the victims' objectification.

To begin with, Laruelle explains his position as follows in his *General Theory of Victims*:

The victim is now a blurred, ambiguous generality, an object of indiscriminate use. Forgotten by conceptual thought, it is now overexploited by images and information in the doxa of "we are all victims." . . . Our goal is different: to relocate the victim, if possible, from the phase of being an intellectual and media object to the status of an object of knowledge, from its image to its concept. (3)

Laruelle critiques the role of those present-day intellectuals who presume to know the victims and claim the right to represent them or speak for them. He further proposes an intentionally abstract, radicalized concept of "the victim-in-person," a formal symbol of the concrete human subject, defined in following terms:

. . . is not a particular or individual victim, but the state of humans insofar as they are capable as such of being persecuted . . . The victim is not victim immediately but is immediately capable of being or of becoming victim.

2 Laruelle's position is evoked here for both comparison and contrast. It is not my intention to claim that Scalapino's *oeuvre* neatly and unproblematically fits into all aspects of Laruelle's model; however, I discern some potential, very much in the spirit of his non-standard thinking that relies on tracking the element of insufficiency in any self-contained way of thinking (including philosophy), in considering particular aspects of Scalapino's work in light of several defining characteristics of the non-philosophical position. Its experimental character, aversion to hierarchies and norms, focus on immanence and materialism, ethical concerns, as well as preoccupation with ordinary experience and posthumanist rather than humanist aspects of lived experience strike me as important affinities with Scalapino's writing.

The victim is the most exposed depth of humans, their capacity to be *defeated* on occasions that also revive this capacity *as a weak force of resistance*. (8, original emphasis)

Today, as the philosopher argues, the victims deserve to rise above the ubiquitous overrepresentation of those who bear responsibility for their predicament and exploitative overexposure of their situation continually projected by the media.

For Laruelle, addressing today's endangered humanity in an ethical way means a radical change of optics, beginning with condemning the victims' overexposure and exploitation by the "media-savvy intellectuals," as he snidely calls them. Already at this point, Laruelle's way of privileging abstract conceptualization smacks of generalization that Scalapino's poetics radically undercuts. Whereas the poet also reiterates the need for a reconceptualization of our optics regarding ourselves and others as potential victims, the poetry of "bum series" refuses to perpetuate any singular or universal perception of the victim or pretend that conceptualizing will be free from the risks that it faces in every other form of discourse; instead, the text simultaneously foregrounds the conceptual excesses of discourse used in relation to the victims and shows them as situated against a setting whose infinitely variable structure must be attended to at every turn of the sign and every line break of the poem. The precarious life situation of the homeless is not presented as emblematic of present-day existential alienation; rather, it is shown as concrete and material. The ethical gesture of the poem entails accounting for the spectator's inescapable implication in social mechanisms of exploitative observation and overexposure.

Scalapino articulates these concerns by having the speaker of "bum series" straightforwardly admit ignorance, expressing radical uncertainty that resonates in the poem's persistent rhyming of the words "bum" (as related to the homeless) and "dumb" (as related to the speaker): "I have been—am—/dumb—as the way/in which that would occur—the/bums—not their existence or/dying from the weather—though/the effect of that" (58). Invoking these colloquially-sounding words rather than their more formal equivalents of, respectively, "homeless" and "stupid," the poet enacts a radicalized performance of ambivalence, pointing to the risk of banality or sheer arrogance inherent in any portrayal of homelessness, or, as the other sections of *way* show, any other form of social victimization. Consequently, the condition of victimization is enacted and engaged rather than presented in the text whose language is reduced to the minimum of simple vocabulary framed in short, heavily hyphenated stanzas, often comprising only single words or paratactic phrases that unfold in deliberately broken syntax and are sparsely arranged across the empty space of the page in a poetic gesture of withholding any contained narrative invested in representation.

Foregrounding the speaker's recalcitrance towards speaking *for* the victims, Scalapino investigates the possibility of "non-hierarchical structure of writing," first proposed during her talk "The Radical Nature of Experience" at the 1996 Assembling Alternatives conference at the University of New Hampshire and later published in her important 1999 collection of essays *The Public World / Syntactically Impermanence* (3). The serial form of *way* intentionally resists pattern as well as transparent and unambiguous singular articulation. The poem enacts a sense of conflict and struggle related to one's failure to address and engage actual deprivation and despair. Reducing the poem's movement to a minimalist yet effectively disruptive interplay of repetition and difference,

Scalapino suggests that any definitive presentation is impossible; rather, the poem's strained, austere motions signify great difficulty and insist on closer investigation of multiple perspectives that bear out the homeless' precarious life situation, simultaneously suggesting that both the speaker and the reader of the poem are guilty of complicity if they adopt any fixed and transparent position in approaching the text. Hence, the poem's language relies on movement dynamics that Scalapino elsewhere referred to as "sound-shape" and aims at direct engagement of the line of separation between reality and our own projections of it. Scalapino's choice of the serial form bears out the multiplying of interrelated perspectival frames of which "bum series," and the whole text of *way*, is composed.³

Despite its apparently abstract quality, the poem is informed by concrete social and ethical concerns that Scalapino addresses conceptually, and thus materially (the poet often emphasized the material aspect of thought in her writings), continually interrogating the gap between writing (i.e. conceptualizing) and events. In her correspondence with poet Judith Goldman, Scalapino comments on this aspect of her work: "As relation between political-social actions and writing: writing, since it is conceptual, is separate from action but may itself be an action by engaging that gap of separation" (Firestone and Lomax 192). "bum series," like Scalapino's entire *oeuvre*, is preoccupied with the mind's constant confrontation with lived experience and concrete social reality, foregrounding conceptual dimension of writing as highly consequential and tracing the dynamics between the real's events and thought. The underlying concern of the poems in *way* is how one's mind is formed, how we respond when confronted with the presence of the other and their extremely vulnerable situation, as well as how our own construction of this encounter occurs and unfolds. Scalapino's poetry shows the impossibility of sidestepping the constructed nature of our conceptions, yet at the same time calls for dismantling of perspective itself, pointing towards limitations and distortions inherent in various social determinations. Her radical investigations carry an impetus that pushes writing toward a conceptual horizon where the lingering poststructuralist dilemma of approaching the real in the face of its entirely discursive character is revisited and addressed in an immanent manner, evocative of Laruelle's non-standard thought. The theorist's sense of the real, aptly captured by Kolozova, proposes a position that offers some insight into Scalapino's writing:

The Real is the only certainty of ourselves we necessarily experience as such, and that experience of certainty is made of "the sheer lived" we all are in the last instance. Thus, I am referring to the notion of certainty in its sense of immanence—of the inalienable, inalterable, inexorable "being there," of the lived each "human-in-human" is in the last instance. This utter experience, this absolute Lived is overwhelming... Therefore, it is necessarily mediated, and mediation is by definition a working of the transcendental (i.e., of signification or of Language). For the mediation to take place the human-in-human

3 For a sustained discussion of the differences between the epic poem form and the serial poem, including an early analysis of *way*, see Joseph Conte's article "Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem" as well as his book *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*.

must execute the auto-alienating gesture of instituting the “Stranger” which will re-present and mediate the suffocating Real one is in the last instance. One is necessarily alienated. (“The Figure...” 63)

For Scalapino, however, alienation itself must be re-examined as a notion that no longer stands for detachment, but rather for the condition of being always already implicated.

In her 1994 experimental novel *Defoe*, Scalapino wrote that “[a]ll the constructions around appear to occur at the same time,” pointing towards the imperative of constant scrutiny of the process of thought formation in relation to the outside (19). “bum series” enacts such scrutiny through a formally radical and non-reflective modality of writing that appears dilated (similarly to the way in which the pupil of an eye reacts to stimuli by widening). It emerges as a heightened mode of language whose task is to sustain a state of attention and active engagement on the part of the author and the reader: “so—dumb as an/active relation to/the bums or the freighter and/the still oil/rigs—on the ocean” (58). As Scalapino observed in *Zither*, such writing is capable of effecting the “process of dismemberment of one’s own thought as the instant of tackling the ‘process of hierarchical definition’”; a radicalized way of constantly scrutinizing one’s subject position, observing one’s mind’s actions as they inevitably participate in the internalization of normative hypotheses, acknowledging existence of hierarchies yet simultaneously unmasking them as arbitrary formations; in short, figuring language as a material site of resistance (18).

Whereas in Scalapino’s other writings the idea of resistance is frequently accompanied by elements of speculative thought, the poetry of *way* relies on a distinctly realistic, or even naturalistic mode. The speaker’s attention is focused on ordinary individuals in concrete settings and situations their lives are contingent upon. The text’s array of soldiers, the handicapped, the elderly, the homeless, factory girls, construction workers, or bus drivers is evocative of Laruelle’s figures of “strangers,” whose ethical modality is the victim, and who partake of Laruelle’s non-philosophical sense of *solitude radicale*. As Kolozova explains, this radical solitude is “one of the many names Laruelle’s non-philosophy gives to (the state of inhabiting) the identity in the last instance of the human-in-human, the radical concept of humanity, correlating with the real of the pure, nonreflected experience of ‘being human’” (*Cut of the Real* 242). The homeless in “bum series” emerge as such “generic” victims, where the term “generic” denotes a non-philosophical rather than philosophical orientation; they are doubly victimized due to their underprivileged social status and their precarious human condition in the present⁴:

the bums—the men—having
died—from
the weather—though their
doing that, seeing things from their view when
they were alive

4 See also Laruelle’s discussion of his notion of “the generic” in *General Theory of Victims*, p. xiv-xviii.

so not to
 be upper class—the new
 wave baggy pants—the
 man with the dyed blonde
 hair—who’s always standing in
 front of the hair salon on
 the corner” (53)

The poem foregrounds sights that illustrate the extent of class difference and simultaneously urges attention to their accompanying indifference. The same social space is occupied by the homeless who are completely dispossessed and the upper class individual, perhaps a hair salon owner, who appears to be an idle observer of the surrounding reality. The construction of these stanzas intentionally refuses to facilitate our judgement of the situation. We only learn how radically different the individuals’ perspectives are. The passage additionally forces the reader to consider the erased perspective of the homeless who froze to death. Their already absent “view” does not overlap with the blonde man’s carefree perspective (and never did), but the speaker points to the need to recognize the position of the homeless, “their view when / they were alive,” and suggests their proximity to the man indifferent to their suffering. This need is what writing brings into sharp focus.

Scalapino envisions writing as an experimental site where every optics must be exposed and deconstructed, including one’s own perception of events and habitual ways of thinking. By foregrounding coexistence and interdependence of radically different perspectives and settings, the social dimension of spatial relations between people, their coming together and separation, construction of visibility and invisibility, examining the situatedness of one’s knowledge and frameworks that impact our ways of seeing, the poet searches for a mode of articulation capable of installing observation as an activity of continual reconceptualization of our received notions about the public world as well as our private existence. It strives for achieving in writing the level of awareness and attention that, while forgoing perspective, allows greater objectivity and clarity of seeing how events occur:

I have been—am—
 dumb—as the way
 in which that would occur—the
 bums—not their existence or
 dying from the weather—though
 the effect of that

for me to
 be dumb—to have
 been actually stupid—so that
 really could occur—the
 bums—in an event (58)

The poem brings into focus occurrence itself as a fact of existing or being found in a particular place and under a particular set of conditions. Attending to this fact emerges as the imperative of our active being in the social world. To this end, Scalapino eschews self-reflexive language based in introspection and imbues the poem with a sense that one is no longer a detached observer,

but always an implicated participant. At the same time, the poem reminds us that every act of observation entails perspective, definition, as well as appropriation. The act of conceptualizing automatically involves objectification of what is seen: “contemplating them, therefore endangering them” (*way* 22). *way*'s characters are generic persons in Laruelle's meaning of the term; they are vulnerable and prone to becoming victims of various life circumstances and frequently projected as individuals who are already or about to be violently dislodged from their illusory position of safety. They are constantly subjected to the public gaze, or perceived by a self-conscious observer who herself is similarly exposed, grappling with a sense of failure to account for her own discomfort, and thus incapable of adequately responding or reacting to observed instances of social deprivation: “I almost/froze—and realized I/could die from it—when the bums/were in that situation—and then not/caring, though that's not possible” (60). Scalapino equally emphasizes the processes of individual perception and social observation, unmasking both as constructions. The observer's vision in the poem is never objective; rather, she unavoidably adopts a particular way of seeing that falsely presumes her own security, an illusory sense of not being the victim that she undeniably is if one is willing to agree with Laruelle's non-philosophical thought. Every field of vision is a matter of subjective and therefore partial perspective; an effect of one's own as well as externally-imposed projections and assumptions. Simultaneously, striving for objectivity paradoxically becomes a gesture on which the poem hinges despite the sheer impossibility of this task. Scalapino's “neo-objectivist” poetics, to use Charles Altieri's term, adopts a speculative stance to objectivity (Altieri qtd. in DuPlessis and Quartermain 302).

For Scalapino, tracking mind's action is what poetic writing must be invested in, even if it is unavoidably implicated in the creation of formations that it seeks to critique and dismantle. Again, the words of Kolozova capture the spirit of Scalapino's conceptual installation in *way*:

The subject is subjected to the rule of the ‘constructed world’ which—in the last instance—installs itself as an acting real *vis-à-vis* the intentionality of the self to reinvent it (and itself). The self is ultimately limited in its workings of autotransformation also by the rule of the real, which is mostly directly enacted by the pure labor of self-preservation of the (human) individual as the continuity of the self-identical “I.” (*Cut of the Real* 171)

Scalapino's characters seen through the lens of Laruelle's figure of “the stranger-in-person” are representative of the radicalized form of subjectivity, which entails a return to the figure of the ordinary individual who is formed by the outside, vulnerable, and mortal. Nevertheless, Scalapino's ethical preoccupations both echo and move beyond a negative version of ethics formulated by philosopher Alenka Zupančič in her 2000 book *The Ethics of the Real*, where ethics emerges as one's continual confrontation with the intransigent real:

as something that “happens to us,” surprises us, throws us “out of joint,” because it always inscribes itself in a given continuity as a rupture, a break or an interruption. According to Lacan, the Real is impossible, and the fact

“it happens (to us)” does not refute its basic “impossibility”: the Real happens to us (we encounter it) as impossible, as “the impossible thing” that turns our symbolic universe upside down and leads to the reconfiguration of this universe. (234)

Whereas such negative understanding of ethics also resonates in Scalapino’s writing, her poetics urges attention and engagement as countermeasures to the Lacanian disempowering sense of the Real. The writing in “bum series” insists on the imperative of investigative (re)writing of the *status quo*. Tempted as one may be to evoke Slavoj Žižek’s “irreducible homelessness”; an abstract paradigm in which homelessness signifies the space of philosophy open to the movement of negativity, Scalapino’s careful reinvestigation of the ways in which homelessness is conceptually situated does not fully yield to this definition⁵. As Scalapino observes in her short essay “Narrating,” published in the anthology *Biting the Error/Writers Explore Narrative*, her writing derives from an anarchic impulse of “writing-as-illusion” and its speculative relation, however incommensurable, to the events of the world:

These are illusions in the practical sense of being ‘only’ writing (writing has no relation to present or historical reality—it has no reality, is it as well, being mind phenomena. So the ‘ordinary’ small action is [to be] as much ‘reality’ as events that are devastating). I am trying to divest hierarchy-of-actions. ‘Hierarchy-of-actions’ voids people’s occurrences (that is, individuals’ actions are relegated to inconsequential or invisible). Such hierarchy substitutes ‘overview’ of ‘history’/interpretation/doctrine—therefore, to divest ‘hierarchy-of-actions’ is certainly a political act. (In one’s/reader’s/viewer’s conceptualization then—[is the intention]). What I’m referring to as ‘divesting hierarchy-of-actions’ by definition has to be in oneself... Fundamentally anarchism (viewing that as being observation itself) is necessitated. (155)

Addressing a gap between writing and events, this passage offers a number of indispensable insights into Scalapino’s complex poetics. While the poet remains skeptical towards writing’s role in directly changing social reality, she locates its potential in conceptual experimentation with non-hierarchical writing mode that puts “ordinary actions” on the same level as those projected as highly visible and “devastating,” which validates actions of those individuals who reside at the bottom of social hierarchy. Such horizontal approach becomes part and parcel of her entire oeuvre and derives from Scalapino’s early interest in anarchism. In her later writings, however, anarchism becomes another formation that must be dismantled. The poet rejects any notion of ground as ultimately constraining and probes much more radically into speculative exploration of groundless scrutiny.

5 Cf. Žižek’s 2006 *The Parallax View*, where the philosopher writes that “homelessness remains irreducible; we remain forever split, condemned to a fragile position between the two dimensions, and to a ‘leap of faith’ without any guarantee” (9).

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