

*Of Indigo and Saffron: New and Selected Poems*  
By Michael McClure (ed. Leslie Scalapino)  
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Before Leslie Scalapino passed away on May 28, 2010,<sup>1</sup> she worked closely with Michael McClure on *Of Indigo and Saffron: New and Selected Poems*, the second selection of his work to be published. The first time was back in 1986 when New Directions published *Selected Poems*. In the introduction to *Selected Poems*, McClure himself explained that he chose the poems intuitively.

Speaking at the Leslie Scalapino Memorial Reading held at U.C. Berkley on the evening of December 3, 2010, McClure remarks that her selection and editing of his book “did a wonderful thing for me: it freed me from myself, from all the heavy armatures and heavy duty pictures of myself that I carried around and presented. [Leslie chose] a selection of my poems that I think really is me without all the preconceptions. Her introduction to it is a beautiful and profound thing to me and I think it will be to many who read it.” McClure describes the time spent with his wife Amy, and Leslie and her husband Tom White during the selection and editing process as “a very deep and rich and meaningful period of my life.”

I agree with McClure that Scalapino’s introduction is “beautiful and profound,” beautiful both in terms of its deep awareness of McClure’s art and beautifully written. Her “Introduction” is profound not only in her reading of McClure’s poems and articulation of his poetics, which are closely aligned with her own, but also when she writes, all too briefly, about McClure’s Buddhist poetics. (Scalapino is a poet who strongly identifies with the Beats, while other Language Poets were much more circumspect and at times ambivalent about the Beats as they tended to follow the paths marked out by Robert Creeley, Philip Whalen, and McClure, then quickly veering off into their own postmodern poetics.) Furthermore, it is no small thing that her 12-page introduction stands as one of the most comprehensive critical pieces devoted to McClure’s beginning to his most recent work. Given the lack of scholarship devoted to McClure’s work maybe those of us who enjoy McClure’s writings will be inspired to devote time and effort to serious critical readings of his voluminous and wide-ranging body of literature.

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<sup>1</sup> For an obituary published on line by her family see <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/scalapino/obit.html> as well as her web site [www.lesliescalapino.com](http://www.lesliescalapino.com). The latter site also includes the full video of the memorial reading given by her friends and is also posted on You Tube.

It may be the case that McClure's own prejudices played no part in the process, as he claims, a process that we may infer did not escape the vicissitudes of intuitive selection back in 1986. Nonetheless, Scalapino is explicit in both the kind of volume she intended and the philosophical presuppositions that informed her selection. She writes in the book's "Introduction" that, "[t]his is not a traditional selected poems. It does not seek to represent the body of work of a poet by encapsulating the books in excerpts" (1). Indeed, Scalapino has seldom if ever been traditional in her poetic, critical, and publishing lives. As the founder of O Books in 1986, the press has consistently published books by artists such as Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley and Robert Grenier, who all work in what she has termed innovative poetics. McClure's 2002 volume *Plum Stones: Cartoons of No Heaven* is part of O Book's catalogue. She tells us that her selection and editing choices, are "based on tracing certain gestures as related to vital elements in Michael McClure's poetry: particularly, a struggle evident in his work for apprehension of 'being' as that is (and as in relation to) language of poetry—as that language is *enactment* of 'being'" (1). These "certain gestures" are traced from McClure's early work including his theatrical compositions to the recent poems herein published as "Swirls in Asphalt." Thus, if you are looking for the conventional selected poems offering a representative sampling of all work to date, then *Of Indigo and Saffron* may not be for you.

Because Scalapino, as mentioned above, is often grouped with the Language Poets, her selection allows us to view McClure's influences on language poetry. That is to say, allows us to see a particular side of McClure's work that would not be available to us if *Of Indigo and Saffron* were a traditional selected poems. This is very useful as one trend in Beat Studies is to assess the various influences of Beat culture on artists of later generations. In McClure's case, his holistic poetics of the human mind-body complex in its reversible relation to all living things draws on genetic and molecular biology, entheogens, philosophy and Buddhism. What is appealing to Language Poets about McClure's work has been his insistence on materiality.

I SAVE MYSELF  
WITH THE NATURE  
of my own body.  
The treasure layer  
of this moment  
is a trillion feet  
DEEP.

"The moment is our one body" McClure writes in "Swirl" 54 (286). A significant part of McClure's breaking with the established/academic, which is to say conditioned, views of science is that he does not limit himself to naturalistic and consilience views of science. Instead, he looks upon science with visionary eyes in which matter is spiritualized through the practiced

enlightening vehicle of embodied consciousness. After all, McClure has not discounted spirituality from his view. “I’m a spiritual seeker” he tells William Perkins in 1992 (LC 297).

McClure’s turning toward Zen Buddhism—we can read initial approaches in *Rain Mirror* (1999)—is poetically and philosophically appropriate because Zen eschews the extremes of nihilism and eternalism while embracing “the treasure layer” of this embodied moment. Furthermore, true to both Beat and Buddhist aesthetics, McClure’s poetry often demonstrates the insufficiency of concepts or conceptual based inquiry to allow the things arrayed about us to stand forth as they are. His latest works—*Touching the Edge: Devotions from the Hummingbird Sangha* (1999) to “Swirls in Asphalt” are all in some way co-extensive with McClure’s study of Zen Master Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253). In “The Time-Being” (*Uji*), Dōgen explains that “The way the self arrays itself is the form of the entire world. See each thing in this entire world as a moment of time” (77). Indeed, as he has done in two previous works, *Touching the Edge* and *Plum Stones*—he begins “Swirls in Asphalt” with a passage from Dōgen: “*The limits of the knowable are unknowable*” (199).

So, why doesn’t Scalapino introduce us in greater depth to this important turn in the poet’s work? Why is *Touching the Edge* excluded from the selection? In his 1999 interview with David Meltzer, McClure says that it is *Touching the Edge: Devotions from the Hummingbird Sangha* (1999) that are “my first intentionally Zen poems” (Meltzer 183). While *Plum Stones: Cartoons of No Heaven* are his “Dōgen Sonatas,” many of the devotions in *Touching the Edge* bear the traces of his beginning study of Dōgen. What is important in a selected poems is that it can serve as a reminder of the different phases in an artist’s work as well as what remains significant. So, the absence of *Touching the Edge* is a loss. Furthermore, as *Of Indigo and Saffron* also includes 65 new poems, almost a book in itself, that bear the traces of McClure’s continued interest in Buddhism and Dōgen in particular, I am left wondering why Scalapino offers so little in an otherwise comprehensive introduction.

Despite this disagreement with Scalapino, *Of Indigo and Saffron* is fascinating selection as it is a kind of study of McClure as poet. My moment of reading through these poems not only remind me of McClure’s tremendous value as an artist but also shows us all in our separation how McClure has worked to show us reinhabitation (*pace* Gary Snyder) of the instant: *This moment. The body bardos. A river that I / step into over and over*. As Scalapino writes, a vital element of McClure’s work has been “language gesture as trace of sensory being in its relation to the instant” (4). Like all fine poetry it is “as if language reflects ‘mystery of being’ *in that separation*” (10). And in a culture that continues the death drive toward totalization and reduction of mystery we are grateful for a little “mystery of being.”

## Works Cited

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(San Francisco Chronicle 2011-02-06). Read more. From the Inside Flap. "Michael McClure shares a place with the great William Blake, with the visionary Shelley, and with the passionate D.H. Lawrence."â€•Robert Creeley.Â "Michael McClure's poetry and prose is one of the more remarkable achievements in recent American literature."â€•Times Literary Supplement. "McClure's poetry is a blob of protoplasmic energy."â€•Allen Ginsberg. Read more. About the Author. Michael McClure is an American poet, playwright, songwriter, and novelist.Â Among her many books are *It's go in horizontal: Selected Poems, 1974â€"2006* (UC Press); *Day Ocean State of Star's Night: Poems and Writings, 1989 and 1999â€"2006*, and *Floats Horse-Floats or Horse-Flows*. Read more. Product details. University of California Press, otherwise known as UC Press, is a publishing house associated with the University of California that engages in academic publishing. It was founded in 1893 to publish scholarly and scientific works by faculty of the University of California, established 25 years earlier in 1868, and has been officially headquartered at the University's flagship campus in Berkeley, California, since its inception. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1969. Pp. xi + 178. W. R. Merrifield (a1).Â In A. Fischer (ed.), *Current directions in anthropology*. *Bulletins of the American Anthropological Association*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Part 2, 3â€"18. Gleason, H. A. Jr., (1961). *An introduction to descriptive linguistics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. (Rev. ed., 1966.) Goodenough, W. H. (1965). *Yankee kinship terminology; a problem in componential analysis*. In E. A. Hammel (ed.), *Formal semantic analysis*. Special Publication of the American Anthropological Association, Vol. 67, No. 5, Part 2, 259â€"287. Jakobson, R. & Halle, M. (1956).