

condense, condense

Lorine Niedecker, *Collected Works*. Ed. Jenny Penberthy,
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"I should like a poem to be seen as well as read", Lorine Niedecker once declared in a letter to Harriet Monroe. Monroe wrote her laconic response across the top of the letter: "Utter mystification". Niedecker had been sufficiently emboldened by her reading of *Poetry's* "Objectivist" issue of 1931, and her subsequent epistolary exchange and meeting with its editor Louis Zukofsky, to submit a group of three surrealist-style poems entitled "CANVASS" for Monroe's editorial consideration in February 1934. Given Monroe's *après la lettre* disapproval of Zukofsky's editorship of the magazine, Niedecker's lack of success would appear unsurprising, although Monroe had published two more conventional lyrics by her in September 1933. Both Monroe and Ezra Pound may have viewed Niedecker as a Zukofsky clone (Pound, with his usual awkward appositeness, dubbed her a "tadpole") especially as Niedecker had a coy habit of wearing her debt to Zukofsky on her sleeve. "Mr. Zukofsky encouraged me to send some of my poems to you", she explains to Monroe, and in a letter to Kenneth Cox thirty-five years later she is still banging the same drum: "without the Feb. 1931 issue of *Poetry* edited by LZ I'd never have developed as a poet". Her loyalty to the prickly Zukofsky, which seems at times to have bordered on the desperate, can seem pathetic in retrospect. But as Jenny Penberthy's lovingly-edited *Collected Works* shows, good poets take their inspiration where they find it, forging tools to suit their own necessity. Niedecker is nobody's woman but her own.

The *Collected Works* is a true act of salvage, a metaphor appropriate to this most waterlogged of writers. "I've wasted my whole life in water", Niedecker laments in "Pioneers", ventriloquising her father's voice. She was born in 1903 and raised on marshy,

flood-prone Black Hawk Island, situated between Lake Koshkonong and Rock River in rural Wisconsin. Her mother lost her hearing in childbirth (Niedecker was an only child), and her father Henry seems to have been financially victimised by his unscrupulous mistress; at any rate the family's fortunes declined steadily, and Daisy Niedecker's deafness and depression led to a testy dependence on her daughter. It has been suggested that Niedecker's awareness of her mother's deafness, and perhaps of her own part in it, accounts for her aural acuity, and a poem like "So he said/ on radio" bears this out with its sonic fragmentation, a kind of broadcast "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves":

I have to fly
wit Venus arms
I found fishing
to Greece
then back to Unifers of Wis
where they got stromt. 90
to determ if same marble
as my arms

The narrative surfaces from white noise, or the white of the page, like verbal flotsam, making sense of her early emphasis on seeing the poem. We are given an image of the poet twiddling the dials on her radio, metaphorically "fishing" for meaning, and the resulting found narrative adopts the voice of the Venus de Milo, perhaps, in suitably fragmented form. Niedecker, like H.D., may dabble in classical precedent, but returns, in a typical piece of rueful wit, to what remains for her the Universe of Wisconsin to make what sense she can of it. This tiny poem subtly embodies a meditation on art in the atomic age; against H.D.'s lofty hermeticism, criticised by Niedecker in a letter to Zukofsky, for "never seem[ing] directly now, living in the present whirl", Niedecker proffers her exploded narrative.

Like Emily Dickinson, perhaps her most germane elective affinity, Niedecker's work also has a fraught and fragmented publication history. Monroe's and Pound's scepticism was shared by other editors. Her first book, the heavily folk-inspired *New Goose*, was published in 1946, but she had to wait fifteen years before the appearance of *My Friend Tree* in 1961. During the interim she worked as a copywriter, scrubbed floors at the Fort Atkinson Hospital and endured not inconsiderable poverty, while working

on a projected book entitled *For Paul and Other Poems*. Paul, a musical prodigy, was the son of Louis Zukofsky and Celia Thaw, following their marriage in 1939. Niedecker's friendship with Zukofsky had survived a damaging affair in the early 1930s, during which time he had insisted on her having an abortion. They both agreed to destroy their correspondence from this period, so all that survives is a misleadingly jaunty record of personal and intellectual exchange. The intensity of Niedecker's interest and delight in Paul's achievements hints at deeper feelings than she explicitly voices in the later correspondence, and Marjorie Perloff has argued that the extended poem "For Paul", and the letters which formed much of the raw material for it, represent "a way to reach the man who was, from the early thirties until her death in 1970, the dominant presence in her personal life". The opening poem of the series has Niedecker sending Paul one of her most prized books, Audubon's *Birds of America*:

Paul
now six years old:
this book of birds I loved
I give to you.
I thought now maybe Paul
growing taller than cattails
around Duck Pond
between the river and the Sound
will keep this book intact,
fly back to it each summer
maybe Paul

Perloff identifies a "profound pathos" in the poem which she argues "derives from the poet's recognition that (1) the child Paul doesn't really care about the things she writes about, but that (2) this isn't important, for the sequence is not for Paul anyway but for his father Louis". The pathos is undoubtedly there, but Perloff concurs with the "poor Lorine" school of interpretation when she writes that "the role of Dear old Auntie, chuckling over little Paul's antics, seems to go against the grain". True, there are caustic moments which sit uncomfortably with the poem's more avuncular, cosy aspects, among them a Larkinesque aubade:

What horror to awake at night
and in the dimness see the light.

Time is white
mosquitoes bite
I've spent my life on nothing.

The thought that stings. How are you, Nothing,
sitting around with Something's wife.
Buzz and burn
is all I learn
I've spent my life on nothing.

However, the method of nuanced juxtaposition employed by Niedecker pulls the poem into a multivalenced collage of personal and public concerns. A sure sign of the success of this technique is the poem's eschewal of self-pity; despite Niedecker's stark recognition of her straitened condition the narrative remains tough-minded and rigorous throughout. The folksy "How are you, Nothing,/ sitting around with Something's wife" recalls Dickinson's playfully uncanny personifications as well as Berryman's crestfallen "me, wag". One of the problems with a poem like "For Paul" is that it doesn't comfortably fit any critical template. It is simultaneously political (see "In the great snowfall before the bomb"), intensely literary, and private to the point of opacity. Indeed, part of the reason for its delayed publication seems to have been what Penberthy describes as Louis Zukofsky's "increasing discomfort with the personal content of the poems". Niedecker's technique has much in common with that of Pound or late Modernists like Plath and Lowell, but if anything, her skilled counterbalancing of the private and the political in "For Paul" is subtler than the monstrous egotistical confections of "Lady Lazarus" or *For Lizzie and Harriet*. Indeed, in her essay on Zukofsky's poetry Niedecker offers a corrective to such depredations: "You cannot express anything unless you have invented how to express it. A poem is not a Freudian 'escape' (what childishness) but an adult release to knowledge, in the most practical, engineering manner". In spite of the deeply personal content of "For Paul", it never seems tactless, even at its most plaintive:

Paul
when the leaves
fall

from their stems
that lie thick
on the walk

in the light
of the full note
the moon

playing
to leaves
when they leave

the little
thin things
Paul

Plainly, Hopkins's "Spring and Fall" is the ur-text here, but this poem showcases the tough delicacy of Niedecker at her best. Penberthy asserts that the "For Paul" poems "are... an assertion of Niedecker's own poetics, the outcome of experimentation with subconscious and with folk—all good poetry must contain elements of both or stems from them—plus the rational, organisational force".

Although she remained touchingly convinced of his genius ("you're a poet nobody can paraphrase, Zu-zu"), Niedecker's friendship with Zukofsky seems gradually to have cooled. He refused to write an introduction to the volume, *T&G: The Collected Poems, 1936-1966* in which the "For Paul" poems eventually appeared, and refused permission to publish an edited volume of his correspondence with her. These decisions hurt Niedecker, but Zukofsky was by no means her only link to the wider literary world. She enjoyed friendships with Ian Hamilton Finlay and Basil Bunting, both of whom thought highly of her writing, as did Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams and Charles Reznikoff. Both Bunting and Carl Rakosi visited her on Black Hawk Island. In 1960 she began a sustaining correspondence with the poet and critic Cid Corman, who lived in Japan, and with whom she shared an interest in the haiku and other Eastern verse forms.

Niedecker married Al Millen, a one-armed housepainter from Milwaukee, in May of 1963, an event she commemorated in

“Tradition”: “I married/ in the world’s black night/ for warmth/ if not repose./ At the close—/ someone”. Despite Millen’s heavy drinking, the marriage brought Niedecker some contentment, and enabled her to retire from her cleaning job. The remaining seven years of her life were among the most productive and creatively satisfying she had known. Although *T&G* was not published until 1969, during these years she composed the striking extended poems “Lake Superior” and “Wintergreen Ridge” (the fruit of motor-trips into Canada and surrounding states taken with Millen), and what Donald Davie has called her “unhappily titled” “Pæan to Place”. This late sequence is her most comprehensive autobiographical statement in verse, examining the peculiarities of her heritage and watery origins:

I was the solitary plover
a pencil

for a wing-bone

From the secret notes

I must tilt

upon the pressure
execute and adjust

In us sea-air rhythm

“We live by the urgent wave
of the verse”

Seven year molt
for the solitary bird
and so young

Seven years the one
dress

for town once a week

One for home

faded blue-striped

as she piped

her cry

Late poems about Thomas Jefferson, William Morris and Charles Darwin, three of her greatest cultural heroes, demonstrate the continuity of her intellectual and political interests throughout forty years of writing: “Yeats saw the betterment of

the workers/ by religion—slow in any case/ as the drying of the moon/ he was not understood”, she writes in “His Carpets Flowered”. This is partly what makes Niedecker such an interesting case: a poet whose clear non-canonicity in a time of cultural squabbles has led to a reputation based largely on “xerox and hearsay”, as Eliot Weinberger observed in 1986. Jeffrey Peterson and Marjorie Perloff have suggested that Niedecker’s association with the Objectivists has long obscured her individuality, and this is surely correct. Objectivism, like Vorticism and Imagism, outlasted its usefulness as a critical label, and even now critics who wish to see in Niedecker a forerunner of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E or other would-be avant garde-isms may (by rights) have a hard time co-opting her. Like Dickinson, she retains her peculiarly American interest in the materiality of language, its concreteness on the printed page, but her language is also as private and inward as Dickinson’s, not an affectless play of haphazard linguistic combinations, however radical. She is a sophisticated and self-conscious pastoralist, closest to the great tradition of pioneering counter-metropolitan writers like Thoreau, Dickinson or Melville. The appearance of this *Collected Works*, which also includes some short prose works and dramatic scripts intended for radio, delineates a powerful, insistent artistic trajectory and should help to bring her the wide readership and recognition she deserves.