

Property, Poverty, Poetry: Lorine Niedecker's Quiet Revelations

by Marie-Christine Lemardeley (Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle)

Even though Lorine Niedecker (1903-1971) lived a rather secluded life in Wisconsin on Black Hawk Island near Fort Atkinson, and despite her deceptively simple declaration, "The Brontes had their moors, I have my marshes," she was anything but a regionalist poet. She kept very much in touch with the international avant-garde, through small press magazines, namely *transition* edited by Eugene Jolas, who was the first one to publish texts by Breton, Reverdy and Soupault along with Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, under the title *Work in Progress*. In a previous paper "Between Resistance and Commitment: Lorine Niedecker's Poetics of Reticence",¹ I drew attention to her poetics of reticence i.e. an interest less in the image formed in the mind, than in the sounds of silence, in the words and the spaces between the words. The form of the Haiku contributed to this aesthetic choice stemming from a resistance to plenty, that her consistent use of folk idiom might have fostered.

This paper² focuses on Lorine Niedecker's dealings with the world around her, near or far, and examines how her poetry reveals autobiographical truths that go beyond the mere confession of everyday concerns. The category "objectivist" to which she is currently associated is presented as an outcrop of imagism and uses Zukofsky's definition "to think of things as they exist", which does not help delineate Lorine Niedecker peculiar tone. I want to briefly determine to what extent her conspicuously transparent poetry enabled her not to bring about a real "revolution of the word" in the terms of the proclamation published in *transition* in 1929, but at least to make certain words revolve upon themselves, which is the original meaning of revolution, and therefore create some quiet yet powerful displacements that in themselves are the substance revelations are made of.

As the title of Gilbert Sorrentino's article indicates "Misconstruing Lorine Niedecker", it is easy to misconstrue Lorine Niedecker's poetry:

(relegating) "non-urban" poets to a kind of weird pastoral limbo, aswirl with vague images of the Stars and Stripes and haymows, and the smell of beer and hot dogs at the old ball game. And it doesn't hurt if the poet so marginalized earned a living at a decidedly nonpoetic job. (...) I would argue that Niedecker has assumed a rural mask from behind which issue these elegant, often wholly empty poems. The selection of rural materials—and it is a selection—is as much artifice as is the coolly arrogant matter of *Spring and All* artifice presented as so many found objects. Niedecker's poems seem notably simple, but they make sudden and absolute demands. (287-9)

It must be said for Gilbert Sorrentino that he was among the first to celebrate Lorine Niedecker's singular voice in a review of her collection *My Friend Tree* published in the literary magazine *Kulchur*. He writes that in her ability to achieve registration of failure without self-pity, Lorine Niedecker is akin to Catullus, Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, Zukofsky and Edward Dorn: "the quality seems to be an ability to simply say something straight out, and leave it alone... "

It is precisely the relative poverty of her poetry, her "rugged reticence" (Corman 44), that is partly responsible for the lack of recognition paid to Lorine Niedecker, who has only recently been pulled from under the shadow of Louis Zukofsky, her mentor (and more). A poem

¹ Delivered at the EAAS Conference-Cyprus, Nicosia April 7th-10th 2006.

² A different version of this paper was given at the " 2006 Bologna Conference: *Reform and Revolution in American Culture and History*" University of Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle.

like the following playfully enhances the arresting power of tautology by giving only a parody of closure, as if to poke fun at the reader in desperate search of meaning or symbol:

A monster owl
out on the fence
flew away. What is it a sign
of? The sign of
an owl. (*Collected Works* 103)

Similarly the often quoted poem below offers no ready answer:

Remember my little granite pail?
The handle of it was blue.
Think what's got away in my life—
Was enough to carry me thru. (*Collected Works* 96)

Peter Middleton draws a parallel between this poem and William Carlos Williams's "Red Wheelbarrow":
so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens (*Collected Poems* 1:224)

Without going too much into the details of the comparison I would like to emphasize what strikes me as the blatant difference between the two poems: while the picture of William Carlos Williams's wheelbarrow survives despite the process of exemplification—in other words the image supports the abstraction and supersedes it in the end—Lorine Niedecker's granite pail resists interpretation and appears in its naked presence, (or absence since the necessary condition to accept this poem is to pretend complicity with the speaker and extravagant trust in her candor). A gloss of Lorine Niedecker's poem could be "not much depends upon what I say, but I say it nevertheless." The poem offers a perfect illustration of that "registration of failure without self-pity" by underscoring what is lost, and the effort of subsistence more than its philosophical implications.

Lorine Niedecker's poverty was real, however. Cold drafts, the constant threat of floods on the shore of Lake Koshkonong were part of her everyday life, which was anything but easy or glamorous: she is remembered as having to sweep floors in hospitals after her failing eyesight prevented her from working as proof-reader for the local journal, *Hoard's Dairyman*.³ Yet as Rachel Blau Duplessis makes it clear in her article, "Lorine Niedecker the Anonymous: Gender, Class, Genre and Resistances," we should be wary of sentimentalizing the poet's poverty; likewise, Sorrentino warns us against the legendary quality of her life story: "endless round of scrubbing hospital floors—on her famous hands and knees." But it remains a fact that Lorine Niedecker's drew from her own experience, or to quote Rachel Blau Duplessis: "Subsistence. Eking. These are some of Niedecker's prime subjects, her identification or insertion therefore not so much in "nature" as a pastoral trope (a literary space) but in nature as a material condition—that is, *inside subsistence*. Spending her life, she has chosen poetry; the recurrent floods have chosen her." (*Woman and Poet* 121-2)

However, Lorine Niedecker's tendency to refer to everyday objects should not make us consider her poetry as simply and naively referential. On the contrary, she taps the "imaginative qualities of actual things" (also the title of a novel by Sorrentino published in 1991, a phrase

³ In 1873 William Dempster Hoard (later Governor of Wisconsin 1889-1891) was responsible more than any other man for Wisconsin's development as a dairy State. He toured the State, preaching the virtues of the cow "the foster mother of the human race").

borrowed from William Carlos Williams) more than their reality: several water plumbing poems humorously evoke the quotidian not as a chore but as a source of pleasure, as in one of the rare poems having a title (in this case the denotative power of a title is undermined):

Nursery Rhyme
As I nurse my pump

The greatest plumber
in all the town
from Montgomery Ward
rode a Cadillac carriage
by marriage
and visited my pump

A sensitive pump
said he
that has at times a proper
balance
of water, air
and poetry (*Collected Works* 285)

Here Lorine Niedecker relies on hyperbole and a lavish display of bad taste, but the result is not satirical or cynical but oddly enough self-derisive. The unlikely comment of the flashy plumber only enhances her self-conscious use of “low” subjects for poetry.

The fact that Lorine Niedecker mentioned the constant worry of having to deal with three cabins inherited from her father (together with debts) should not make us jump to false conclusions. It is clear from reading her correspondence with Louis Zukofsky and Cid Corman, that owning a house is both a source of security and a burden, especially when the tenant cannot pay his rent:

Property is poverty—
I've foreclosed.
I own again

These walls thin
As the back
Of my writing tablet (*Collected Works* 194-195)

(. . .)
To foreclose⁴
or not
on property
and prose

or care a kite
if the p-p
be yellow, black
or white (*Collected Works* 197)

Another poem entitled FORECLOSURE expresses frustration at having to deal with proprietorship, and again connects mundane matters with the world of prose (Corman 37):

FORECLOSURE
Tell em to take my bare walls down
My cement abutments
Their parties thereof
And clause of claws

Leave me the land
Scratch out: the land

May prose and property both die out

⁴ To foreclose is a legal proceeding barring a mortgagor to redeem property.

And leave me peace (*Collected Works* 291)

The legal contract seems an encroachment upon her desire to write as the paronomasia “clause of claws” indicates. The paronomasic play may also be an oblique indictment of the predatory quality of the early settlers of Wisconsin who stole the land from the Indians, whose only traces ironically appear in the name of cars (if Cadillac is a French name, Pontiac was an Indian Chief) or place names like Black Hawk, the scene of Indian resistance and defeat:

Black Hawk held: In reason
Land cannot be sold,
Only things to be carried away,
And I am old.

Young Lincoln's general moved,
Pawpaw in bloom,
And to this day, Black Hawk,
Reason has small room. (*Collected Works* 99)

Thus addressing the old Indian chief, the poem pays tribute to his wisdom long gone and replaced by an acquisitiveness that Lorine Niedecker constantly deplors:

Don't tell me property is sacred!
Things that move, yes!—
Cars out rolling thru the country
How they like to rest

On me—beer cans and cellophane
On my clean-mowed grounds.
Whereas I'm quiet . . . I was born
With eyes and a house.

The poems that have the most obvious political overtones however never reach stridency. The angle is often deliberately diminutive, the focus narrow, the better to enhance the violence of the denunciation. The years in which Lorine Niedecker wrote were overshadowed by the palpable tensions of the Cold War; yet, instead of addressing the topic directly she embeds it in a critique of beauty and the superficiality of the roles assigned to women by implicit gender laws:

Beautiful girl—
pushes food onto her fork
with her fingers—
 will throw the switches
of deadly rockets? (*Collected Works* 185)

Likewise the allusion to atom bomb shelters is not exactly disguised but at least reduced to her own sense of property, which we could almost replace by propriety:

"Shelter"
Holed damp
cellar-black beyond
the main atrocities
my sense of property's
adrift

Not burned we sweat—
We sink to water Death
(your hand!—
this was land)
disowns (246-7)

Thus by drawing attention to the darker side of the word “shelter” used as a title in quotation marks and italics, she makes the word take on the sinister overtones linked to the obsessions of the Cold War era.

Nevertheless, Lorine Niedecker rarely indulges in straightforward political takes on any topic. The poetic medium is always her prime concern, the presence of language more powerful than any message. In a poem often thought to be a kind of apology for getting married again at 60, the form itself invites more questions than it provides answers, especially the last line:

I married

in the world's black night
for warmth
 if not repose
 At the close—

someone.

I hid with him
from the long range guns.
 We lay leg
 in the cupboard, head

in closet.

A slit of light
at no bird dawn—
 Untaught
 I thought

he drank

too much.

I say
 I married
 and lived unburied.

I thought—(228)

A kind of “American Gothic” aura emanates from this poem, especially through certain visual echoes: “close, repose, cupboard, closet”, or rhymes: “married/unburied” pointing to the ghostlike quality of the married state. The shelter of marriage strangely resembles a military hideout (“long range guns”) in which the newlyweds seem not ducked, but “tucked and covered” in their common closet but more precisely, the last line seems to place this whole reflection (“I thought” followed by a pregnant dash) outside the realm of reality: is it a dream or not? The absence of closure leaves this “scene from a marriage” open; it is a *moving* poem in both sense of emotionally powerful and in motion. It is a disturbing and disturbed poem. The process of condensation is beautifully exemplified in the three monosyllables that seem to characterize a rude awakening: “no bird dawn.” (l.13)

Yet, as Jenny Penberthy has convincingly argued, Lorine Niedecker does not draw her inspiration from her life only. Biographies and correspondences have inspired some her most interesting and sometimes puzzling poems: Santayana, Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Darwin, Lincoln etc. Thus after reading a biography of the author of *Frankenstein*, she wrote:

Who was Mary Shelley?
What was her name
before she married?

She eloped with this Shelley
she rode a donkey
till the donkey had to be carried.

Mary was Frankenstein' s creator
his yellow eye
before her husband was to drown

Created the monster nights
after Byron, Shelley

talked the candle down.

Who was Mary Shelley?
She read Greek, Italian
She bore a child

Who died
and yet another child
who died.
(212-213)

Mixing the anecdotal and the historical (anecdotes are etymologically unpublished items), the trivial ("his yellow eye") and the tragic ("her husband was to drown"), the poem ends on a dark melancholy note, which is all the more stirring as it seems to ignore a principle of economy and instead hammers in the word "child" and the phrase "who died". The absence of comment makes these repetitions all the more striking and leaves us somewhat nonplussed. As Rachel Blau Duplessis put it, in his poem Lorine Niedecker comes very close to making a feminist statement; however, in her own terms, avoiding pathos and generalization, that *land artist* Robert Smithson equates with cultural confinement: "Writing should generate ideas into matter, not the other way around" (quoted by Peter Quartermain in Penberthy, *Woman and Poet* 227): "a work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world". Peter Quartermain concludes "So too the poem. Words enter the life, the life enters the words." (Penberthy 227)

One short poem by Lorine Niedecker wonderfully raises the question of identity and of the connection between words and world:

Scuttle up the workshop,
Settle down the dew,
I'll tell you what my name is
When we've made the world new. (*Collected Works* 87)

Making the world new in the anonymity of her workshop, Lorine Niedecker is thus completing the mission assigned by Ezra Pound in his *ABC of Reading*: "Literature is news that STAYS news" (Pound 29). Lorine Niedecker's poetry is not in danger of being translated into clearcut images or straightforward meanings. It makes demands on the reader who should hear and see the poem at once, and be alert to the minutest sound and sense variations. Lorine Niedecker's makes quiet revelations in that she expresses a desire to "make the world new" not by means of spectacular denunciations or loud proclamations. Her reticence to name and the density of her poetry cleanse the outside world of its prosaic crust and the everyday words of their old associations. She does not write "comfort poetry" (Rosemarie Waldrop in Bernstein 67), nor does being an objectivist entail dealing with solid objects only. The dew seems a very apt metaphor for the trade Lorine Niedecker plied in her "condensery": quietly but surely making sense out of sound "dew, due, do?" thus forcing us to listen anew.

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