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A Sense of Interiority: Lorine Niedecker's "Lake Superior"

Lake Superior, by Lorine Niedecker. Seattle, Washington: Wave Books, 2013.

While Lorine Niedecker's poetry has always held the attention of readers keen enough to seek it out, with the publication of the seminal *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* by the University of California Press in 2002 (edited by Jenny Penberthy), a surge of interest in Niedecker's work took place, and this interest has only burgeoned over the past decade. We've seen a reprint of Niedecker's early Mother Goose-inspired poems; publication of her long poem "Paeon to Place" in facsimile of the original longhand; inclusion in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*; a book of photographs and reminiscences from persons who knew Niedecker personally; a wonderfully engaging book of essays about Niedecker edited by Elizabeth Willis; and, in 2011, the first full biography of Niedecker (penned by Margot Peters, a Wisconsin native who has written biographies on Charlotte Brontë and Bernard Shaw, among others). The latest installment in this assortment of Niedecker texts is Wave Books' anonymously edited (more on that later) 2013 reprinting of another of her long poems: "Lake Superior."

Unlike the reprinting of "Paeon to Place" (co-published by Woodland Pattern and Light and Dust in 2003) or the Mother Goose-inspired poems in *New Goose* (Rumor Books, 2002), Wave's *Lake Superior* contains, as the subheading states: "LORINE NIEDECKER'S / POEM AND JOURNAL // ALONG WITH OTHER / SOURCES, DOCUMENTS, / AND READINGS." Niedecker took countless notes for this poem ("260 mostly typed, single-spaced pages" according to Penberthy) primarily on natural history and geology, interlaced with personal reflection and narrative of her and husband Al Millen's circumnavigation of the lake in 1966. By including twenty pages of Niedecker's notes on the poem, we gain a very real sense of Niedecker's process of composition and condensation, famously outlined in her

poem "Poet's work": "Grandfather / advised me: / Learn a trade // I learned / to sit at desk / and condense // No layoff / from this / condensery." For example, this excerpt from one paragraph of notes:

The journey of the rock is never ended. In every tiny part of any living thing are materials that once were rock that turned to soil . . . In our blood is iron from plants that draw it out of the soil. Your teeth and bones were once coral.

Becomes this well-known opening of "Lake Superior":

In every part of every living thing
is stuff that once was rock

In blood the minerals
of the rock

If we read closely, we find similar groundwork for other stanzas in these twenty pages of notes.

For those new to Niedecker, the inclusion of the notes demonstrates, quite overtly, the fastidious side of Niedecker's personality, along with her indefatigable pursuit of natural history. Reading the land, for Niedecker, meant not only learning where the rocks come from ("Iron the common element of earth"), but acknowledging and recognizing those that engaged the land before her, albeit Native or European explorers. The final three "sources" Wave includes in the book, for example, are writings by Aldo Leopold, Pierre Esprit Radisson, and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft—wildly different influences on "Lake Superior." These inclusions by Wave are welcome and provide fresh access points to understanding Niedecker's intellectual pursuits and, in turn, her compositional process. Wave makes our own introductory scholarship of the poem quite easy in this regard. We are able to unpack, for example, the following snippet:

Radisson:
"a laborinth of pleasure"
this world of the Lake

Long hair, long gun

Fingernails pulled out
by Mohawks

In addition to the writings by Leopold, Radisson, and Schoolcraft, Wave includes a lengthy essay by Douglas Crase entitled "Niedecker and the Evolutional Sublime"; three letters from Niedecker to Cid Corman (her dear friend and, at times, publisher who later became her literary executor); some unusual prose, interlaced with haiku, from Basho (translated by Corman); "Tour 14A" from a Wisconsin travel guide Niedecker worked on, published by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1941; and an assortment of facsimiles of Niedecker's own notes, both written and typed, on a variety of subjects. The overall arch of the book becomes, then, as Wave notes on its website, "a collection of personal, geologic, and historical writings"; of "strata that inform a single poem's creation and resonance."

"Strata" is a very fitting term. Again, the choice to publish "Lake Superior" amidst artifacts that directly influenced its composition is not only welcome, but wonderfully insightful and engaging. We enter the poem in a completely new way, and the book, in turn, delights both Niedecker veterans and novices:

Wild pigeon

Did not man
 maimed by no
 stone-fall

mash the cobalt
 and carnelian
 of that bird

Nevertheless, and somewhat obviously, the great foil of this approach lies in the fact that any other number of choices could have been made in terms of what deserved or didn't deserve to be included alongside Niedecker's magnificent poem. With 260 pages of notes to choose from, how did Wave decide on these twenty? Why Douglas Crase's essay and not someone else's? In fact, it is easy to argue with Crase's essay and his conversation around the "evolutional" and "egotistical sublime." Crase's essay, quite astute at times, jumps around haphazardly at others, and its inclusion underscores an unclear agenda from Wave's anonymous editor. One wonders why, for example, Jenny Penberthy's eighteen-page essay "Writing Lake Superior" from *Radical Vernacular* (the aforementioned book of essays edited by Elizabeth Willis) was not reprinted here. Penberthy remains our preeminent Niedecker scholar, and the essay would quite naturally comple-

ment the other supplementary materials, given that they are meant to "inform a single poem's creation." As the twenty pages of Niedecker's notes are the same ones found in *Lorine Niedecker: Women and Poet* (National Poetry Foundation, 1996), Wave's hope was clearly not to avoid reprints. The inclusion of Crase's essay is an enigma.

Which takes us to Wave's anonymous editor. Nowhere in *Lake Superior* does it indicate who, in fact, made these editorial decisions, a very strange omission for a book whose method of composition is compilation. Wave's Website says "Edited by Wave Books," though Amazon leads us to believe Joshua Beckman served as editor. The editorial choice of what to include alongside Niedecker's poem carries a certain responsibility, as Niedecker herself is no longer here to approve or disapprove of such material. Wave is surely influencing how future generations will receive this poem. In this light, it is somewhat negligent to present this book as anonymously edited. An editorial introduction would have solved this problem easily.

Nevertheless, in regards to the other ancillary materials, the choice of letters to Corman is appropriate, given their content and their proximity to the trip around Lake Superior (though, again, Niedecker wrote letters constantly and there are many others that could have been included). The inclusion of Bashō offers a complementary, historic parallel in terms of witnessing the haikus alongside the lengthier prose from which the haikus gained inspiration. The excerpted tour from the WPA guide to Wisconsin provides a fascinating relic from the time Niedecker was alive, but also a real-life employment of Niedecker's microscopic lens on the surrounding geography and geology. The travel guide is abundant with minutiae done away with in travel guides of today. Finally, the various facsimiles of Niedecker's long-hand and typewritten notes mark the book's most intimate moments. The physical act of writing is made visceral. The facsimiles allow us to imagine, quite readily, Niedecker on the road with her typewriter, or at her desk in her house on Black Hawk Island, annotating her own notes, drafting and revising these brief poems that, layered together, comprise the "Lake Superior" we have today:

I'm sorry to have missed
 Sand Lake
My dear one tells me
 we did not
We watched a gopher there

Despite its marginal bumps, *Wave's Lake Superior* is a pleasant and necessary edition to the expanding oeuvre of texts both by and about Niedecker. Moreover, its unique method of compilation (not to mention the beautiful and simple design, even the paper choice) unfurls a realm of fresh insights. The historical writings offer context. Niedecker's notes, the WPA guide she worked on, and the facsimiles give the reader a sense of interiority, as if we are alongside Niedecker as she composes the poem. Crase's essay offers a critical perspective, whether or not we abide by it. And, most importantly, the poem itself stands the test of time.

One wonders, then, in absorbing the book as a whole, at the lack of recognition Niedecker received in her lifetime (unlike her male Objectivist counterparts). Why did Niedecker publish only moderately? Why did it take over thirty years (Niedecker died in 1970) to gain popular interest? While a variety of factors would need to be considered to answer these questions (for example, there is only one extant recording of Niedecker reading—a handful of poems captured by Cid Corman on his visit to Niedecker's home the month before she died [the reading, thankfully, is available on PennSound]), the previous decade's giant wave (no pun intended) of interest is likely due, quite simply, to the ongoing realization that her poems, in their concision, thoughtfulness, attention to natural history, and sonic quality are unlike any others given to us in the twentieth century. They demand to be read, and read again, and the recent publication trend reflects that. It is an encouraging light, one in which *Wave's Lake Superior* ably sets foot.