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"and silence": Lorine Niedecker and the Life of Poetry.

Lorna Elizabeth Jowett

A thesis submitted in candidature for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

University of Durham

Department of English Studies

1994

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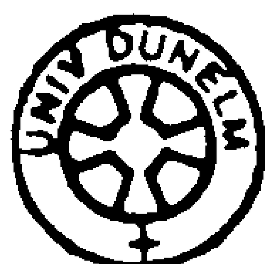

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"and silence": Lorine Niedecker and the Life of Poetry.

LORNA ELIZABETH JOWETT

Thesis Abstract.

Ph. D. (University of Durham) 1994.

This thesis is a study of the work of the American poet Lorine Niedecker (1903 - 1970). Since Niedecker has been so neglected by critics and students of American poetry, one of the aims of the thesis has been to determine her affinities, and to place her in relation to certain poetic traditions, for example, the Modernism of Pound or Williams, or the Objectivism of Louis Zukofsky. Firstly, I examine some of the choices Niedecker made as a practising poet, and suggest that these have affected not only the writing of her poetry but also its reception, especially with regard to her gender and marginality. The second part of the thesis looks at how Niedecker has been misrepresented by critics and editors who have concentrated on certain themes and subjects in her work, ignoring others. Thus the prevalent image of Niedecker as a poet of place or locality and of nature is challenged and more subversive work on war, politics, and women, is recovered for discussion. Finally I argue that silence is an integral part of Niedecker's poetics, with specific investigation of condensation, the unspoken, sound, and the use of space in poetic form. Again, critics have misrepresented Niedecker's poetics, and it has seldom been recognized that her poetics often continue and further previous poetic practice, as well as being innovative and at times subversive. This thesis aims to demonstrate not only how Niedecker relates to the poetic canon, but also that by the very nature of her poetic practice and her identity as a (woman) poet, Niedecker challenges that canon and the criteria which exclude her from it.

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DECLARATION.

This thesis is the original work of the author except where acknowledged by reference, and no part of the thesis has been previously submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

I wish to acknowledge the help of those libraries holding Niedecker manuscript material which I visited in the course of my research for this project: the Mugar Memorial Library at the University of Boston; the Poetry/Rare Books Collection at S.U.N.Y., Buffalo; the Louis Zukofsky Collection in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; and the Dwight Foster Public Library, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. To Gail and Bonnie Roub, Mary Gates, Marilla Fuge and all who helped me during my short time at Fort Atkinson, I offer warm thanks, particularly for their boundless and infectious enthusiasm. Thanks are also due to Phyllis Walsh, who made a special trip to Fort Atkinson, her former home town, to meet me and discuss Niedecker's life and work.

I must also thank Cid Corman, Niedecker's literary executor, for his permission to use unpublished letters and other manuscript material, and for his encouragement to all Niedecker scholars.

Help was at hand nearer home and I would like to acknowledge and personally thank Ric Caddel for sharing with me his store of Niedecker knowledge and contacts, and Harriet Tarlo for her enthusiasm as a Niedecker reader and critic. To my supervisor, Dr. Diana Collecott, without whom this project would never have been begun, I offer special thanks for her invaluable encouragement, advice, direction and help.

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Finally, I owe an enormous personal debt of thanks to my husband, Gavin Walker – for everything.

INTRODUCTION.

Lorine Niedecker almost always needs some introduction. Niedecker was born in 1903, five collections of her work were published during her lifetime, and her death in 1970 caused hardly a ripple in literary circles. Although several publications of her poetry emerged after her death (see Publishing Chronology on page 5), only one remains in print. Niedecker is considered to be a very minor poet. She is obscure. She rarely appears in anthologies. If she is associated with a poetic movement, then it is with the Objectivist group, who are almost equally unknown.

One critic describes Niedecker as "a poet whose work continues to be muffled by her categorization as a minor 'objectivist' " (Nichols, 28) and certainly in criticism her name is most often mentioned in connection with the Objectivists, more specifically with Louis Zukofsky. If Niedecker is only to be seen as ancillary to Zukofsky, her situation is desperate, for Zukofsky and the Objectivists are themselves on the margins of the poetic canon, despite their influence on later generations of poets. Discussing Niedecker and the Objectivists is difficult, not least because of the difficulties in talking of an Objectivist "group" or "school"; more recent criticism is moving toward less well-defined terms like "nexus". This is not to say that the Objectivist poets did not have common aims and methods for poetry, and indeed as their careers progressed, these similarities became more obvious, yet as one recent study notes "theirs was an amorphous movement, for they had neither programme nor agenda" (Quartermain, 2). In fact, the "movement" began when George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff and Zukofsky started meeting at the house of William Carlos Williams.

Niedecker later spoke of herself as "on the periphery" of Objectivism (Letter to Corman, 28 May 1969, *Between*, 193), and once described its impact on her: "the first flush of the launching of the 'Objectivist' movement was over but not long after the Feb '31 issue of Poetry (Chicago) had come out and I saw it and knew here was the centre of literature in this country and in the world" (Letter to Cox, 11 Jun. 1969, "Extracts," 37). This Objectivist issue of *Poetry* inspired her to write to its editor, Zukofsky, thus launching the most important and influential literary relationship of Niedecker's life, and

perhaps also of Zukofsky's. Although Niedecker admired the work of Zukofsky and Reznikoff, I will show that she had at least some reservations about Oppen and Rakosi, the other two members of the original group. Yet perhaps the *idea* of a movement, and one to which she belonged, however peripherally, was more important to Niedecker as a poet than anything else. "As with the other poets in the Objectivist canon," writes one critic, "at different phases of her life she was both interested in other movements and was her own independent movement" (Tarlo, 40). One of the aims of this study is to show how Niedecker relates to other poets, and since her connection with the Objectivists has been so often cited, I hope also to show her work and poetics in a wider context.

In my thesis I suggest some reasons for Niedecker's continuing marginalization, taking in not only more general factors like provinciality and gender, but also Niedecker's poetic strategies and methods, as well as her influences and associations. However, one very practical and obvious reason for a poet remaining on the margins of the literary canon is the unavailability of their work. Jane Tompkins notes that, "the reputation of a classic author arises not from the 'intrinsic merit' of his or her work, but rather from the complex of circumstances that make texts visible initially and then maintain them in their pre-eminent position" (xii). I look at this situation more closely in my first chapter which also examines some of the choices Niedecker made as a practising poet, and suggests that these have affected not only the writing of her poetry but also its reception, especially with regard to her gender and marginality.

The second part of the thesis looks at how Niedecker has been misrepresented by critics and editors who have concentrated on certain themes and subjects, ignoring the full range of Niedecker's work and poetic concerns. I have borrowed Niedecker's phrase "light and silence" (from "Wintergreen Ridge") to describe these critical foci and blind spots. I follow critics like Jenny Penberthy and Rachel Blau DuPlessis in challenging the prevalent image of Niedecker as a poet of place or locality and of nature, but also aim to further discussion on these popular critical issues, drawing new relevant connections, and examining Niedecker's own ideas on these subjects. In chapters 4 and 5 I recover for discussion more subversive work on war, politics, and women, and try to suggest why it has been suppressed, neglected or misrepresented.

Finally I argue that silence is an integral part of Niedecker's poetics, with specific investigation of condensation, the unspoken, the use of space in poetic form, and sound. Again, critics have misrepresented Niedecker's poetics, with little detailed discussion devoted to them, and there has been little effort to relate Niedecker to other poets and poetic traditions. By using both published and unpublished notes and letters of Niedecker's, I develop some idea of her poetic thinking and methods, as well as what influences and affinities she may have felt.[1] It has seldom been recognized that, as well as being innovative and at times subversive, Niedecker's poetics often continue and develop previous poetic practice. This thesis aims to demonstrate not only how Niedecker relates to the poetic canon, but also that by the very nature of her poetic practice and her identity as a (woman) poet, Niedecker challenges that canon and the criteria which exclude her from it.

As one of my main aims has been to show the misrepresentation and partial erasure of Niedecker's work and poetics, I have tried both to suggest new ways of reading poems frequently discussed in criticism and to bring in less well-known poems. In an effort to indicate which poems are better-known and more frequently reprinted, I have adopted a somewhat complex citation system for Niedecker's poems. The primary text used is the 1970 Fulcrum Press edition *My Life By Water: Collected Poems 1936-1968* (the American *T&G* that emerged at around the same time contains much the same poems with a very few variations of selection and arrangement). Both editions were published in Niedecker's lifetime and she must have had a major say in the choice of poems; but although *My Life By Water* has the word "collected" in the title it is not a complete edition of Niedecker's work to date. Since *My Life By Water* contains no poems later than 1968, I have used *The Granite Pail: The Selected Poems of Lorine Niedecker* as my second text for more "popular" poems, though this edition was put together by Cid Corman after Niedecker's death and she did not choose the poems herself.[2] This is now, of course, the only edition of Niedecker's work still in print. For later poems not included in either of these two editions I have cited the 1991 Pig Press edition of *Harpsichord & Salt Fish* edited by Jenny Penberthy. Most other poems not included in any of the former appear in Tandy Sturgeon's thesis *A Critical Edition of the*

Collected Poems of Lorine Niedecker: I have used Robert Bertholf's *From This Condensery: The Complete Writings of Lorine Niedecker* only when he includes a poem (usually previously unpublished drafts) not given by Sturgeon. Therefore the reader may generally conclude that a poem cited from *A Critical Edition of the Collected Poems of Lorine Niedecker* is rarely reprinted or mentioned in critical discussion, while one cited from *My Life By Water* or *The Granite Pail* is likely to be a better-known poem.

PUBLISHING CHRONOLOGY

1946	*New Goose.*
1961	*My Friend Tree.*
1968	*North Central.*
1969	*T&G.*
1970	*My Life By Water: Collected Poems 1938-1968.*
[31 December 1970	**Death of Lorine Niedecker.]**
1976	*Blue Chicory.* Ed. Cid Corman.
1985	*The Granite Pail: The Selected Poems of Lorine Niedecker.* Ed. Cid Corman
	From This Condensery: The Complete Writings of Lorine Niedecker. Ed. Robert Bertholf.
1986	*"Between Your House and Mine": The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960 to 1970.* Ed. Lisa Pater Faranda.
1991	*Harpsichord & Salt Fish.* Ed. Jenny Penberthy.
1993	*Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931-1970.* Ed. Jenny Penberthy.

This chronology includes all the book collections of Niedecker's writing published before and after her death, though during her lifetime she constantly published poems and groups of poems in small magazines. It is interesting that four of the books in this chronology have been published in the U.K. What is most notable, however, is that all but one of the editions of Niedecker's poetry were published in the last ten years of her life or after her death in 1970. "Took a lifetime/ to weep/ a deep/ trickle" she wrote in one poem ("Now in one year" *Life*, 82).

I. "Kept mum": Silences in Niedecker's personal and poetic life.

1. NIEDECKER'S CHOICES FOR POETRY: "poetry comes first".

"Even in a time like ours," one commentator has written, "when every sort of behavior is open to varieties of analysis, Lorine Niedecker comes through as choosing her way of life as a poet" (Bertholf, "Niedecker," 229). Niedecker did not think it necessary to have "a poet's life to get at his poetry" (Letter to Corman, 15 Dec. 1966, *Between*, 109) and complained when critics discussed "LN *personally* – when what we're talking about is *poetry*" (Letter to Zukofsky, 26 Sept. 1962, *Correspondence*, 321). But Sherman Paul states: "Poetry is so much the essential life of poets that essential autobiography is essential to explaining it" (175). Niedecker's life enters into her poetry in very obvious ways when she writes poems directly about people she knows or things that have happened to her – and this she does often. Yet I hope to show that the choices she made in life also affected her development as a poet, and it seems valid to discuss biography where it is relevant and can deepen our understanding of Niedecker's poetry and poetics. For women poets, this correlation might be even more important, and one critic suggests that a woman poet's "struggles are . . . not literary but part of life," concluding, "it is to her life, therefore, that we must turn to understand the process by which she comes both to define and to accept herself as woman and poet" (Bennet, 10).

Niedecker herself was very interested in biographies, journals and letters, and these formed a large part of her reading material. At one time she edited for publication the letters written to her by Louis Zukofsky but in the end Zukofsky denied permission to release the manuscript. She wrote, "He thinks of it as biography, I think of it as chunks of beautiful literature, something he wrote not just for me but the world" (Letter to Corman, 7 Oct. 1965, *Between*, 73). In my own study I will be drawing heavily on Niedecker's own correspondence, even more important in this case as Niedecker never formally discussed her work, her poetics or the choices she made as a poet.

Perhaps Niedecker's most influential choice was to stay at home in Wisconsin. She was an only child and from the time of her birth her mother began to go deaf, so the two never communicated normally. Niedecker began attending college in Beloit but

returned home after only two years when her mother became totally deaf. In 1931, having parted amicably from her first husband a few years before, Niedecker was inspired by Louis Zukofsky's guest editing of the Objectivist issue of *Poetry.* She wrote to and subsequently visited Zukofsky in New York, sometimes staying for long periods. This must have been the only time Niedecker lived in a big city and a literary centre, but, as I will explain below, she soon returned home to her parents for good. The family lived in a fairly isolated area, on Black Hawk Island, about five miles from the small town of Fort Atkinson. Niedecker chose to stay there, moving out of her parent's house to a small cabin not far down the road where she lived, alone for most of her life, without a car or telephone. On the occasion of her second marriage in the sixties, Niedecker moved to Milwaukee where her husband worked, but she returned to Black Hawk every weekend and after a few years they both retired there permanently.

Black Hawk Island is a narrow peninsula where the Rock River flows into Lake Koshkonong; it is marshy, wet, and floods at least once every year. Despite these inconveniences, it was Niedecker's chosen home and was of paramount importance both to her personally and to her poetry, as I will show in chapter 2. The silence of isolation became necessary to Niedecker for her poetry, in preparation and composition, in form and execution, and she worried about things which might disturb her peace.

Yet although Niedecker chose to stay at home on Black Hawk Island in order that she might have silence in which to develop her poetry, the same choice kept her silent about it. "I'd like not to appear a freak," she wrote (quoted in Gartung, 43), always anxious that the neighbours might find out she was a poet, and she asked in one poem: "What would they say if they knew/ I spend two months on six lines/ of poetry?" ("In the great snowfall before the bomb" *Life*, 61). So she tried to keep her writing a secret and was surprisingly successful. It might have been more difficult to maintain the secrecy had Niedecker had many close friends locally, but since she seems to have been solitary by nature this was not a great problem. Indeed, she kept such a low profile that Gail Roub, one of the few local friends with whom she discussed her poetry, has remarked, "Lorine, who had published a book of verse in England, remained virtually unknown to the community" (40).

Niedecker was an insider-outsider in her local community: "she is inside the social class," writes DuPlessis, "yet outside by virtue of her artistic production" (101). Of course, Niedecker was not (in the eyes of her community) primarily a poet, nor even as many other poets were an academic, but a proof reader for the local journal, *Hoard's Dairyman*, later a hospital cleaner; she had to work at something other than literaure to pay the bills and this meant that her split identity was more pronounced. "I have to work among the people here + live with my neighbors etc.," Niedecker wrote to Zukofsky (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Nov. 1962, Austin). And although a large part of Niedecker's poetic was based on the folk, she could never reconcile herself to being seen by them as a poet – "out here you hide poetry" (Letter to Williams, 24 Dec. 1956, Jargon). One commentator states: "American poetry has always been written in spite of not because of, the culture it inhabits. With rare exceptions, it has remained an underground activity" (Weinberger, 407). It is interesting then, that DuPlessis further suggests that in the poem "In the great snowfall before the bomb", Niedecker "defines her distinction from those among whom she lives as if in disguise ('I was Blondie')" (105-6).

However, there was more to this secrecy than the simple desire not to have the neighbours talking about her. On the publication of her first collection, *New Goose*, Niedecker sent a copy to a friend with the message:

> Since you are one of the few to receive it in Fort, I don't know if you should be puffed up or suspicious about something. I have to ask that it be kept mum – folks might put up a wall if they knew ("She writes poetry, queer bird etc...") and I have to be among 'em to hear 'em talk so I can write some more! (Letter to Florence Dollase, c.1946, quoted in Knox, 20)

It was not just that Niedecker did not want her folk to know that she wrote poetry; she didn't want them to know she wrote poetry *about them*. I have already mentioned that Niedecker often incorporated real events and people into her writing, and she also used real "folk conversation" addressed to or overheard by her, and letters to Zukofsky show that this was frequently included verbatim. Perhaps then, it is not surprising that such poems might not have been entirely welcome to everybody.

This concern surfaces again in a letter written to Zukofsky after a small article revealing Niedecker's poetic activities had appeared in the local paper: "The worst is to

have the ordinary person look at you as tho you wrote of moonlight and roses + and were a simpleton in general, but never stir himself to find out otherwise. Now that they do know I can't wait till they read Goose – but they probably won't bother" (Letter to Zukofsky, 8 Dec. 1948, *Correspondence*, 156). Here, although she accepts the consequences of being known as a poet – the freak factor – Niedecker seems almost to want the local people to read her poetry, perhaps with slightly malicious anticipation, so that she can find out how they react to her portrayal of them. But she knows them well enough to realize that "they probably won't bother" because poetry means nothing to them. "Townspeople whispered that Niedecker wrote poetry, but I never knew anyone who read any of it. Since she seemed to avoid interaction with people, it was generally assumed that what she wrote was of little importance," wrote one critic who was on the spot in Fort Atkinson (Walsh, 1).

This may be one reason that her secret, exposed several times by local papers and well-meaning admirers, was more or less kept; most people, even if they registered on reading about Lorine Niedecker the poet, that this was Henry Niedecker's daughter from Black Hawk, were so little interested in poetry that they soon forgot all about it. It is perhaps ironic that this was so, for Niedecker certainly did not write the kind of "moonlight and roses" verse many people still imagine poetry must be, and her folk-inspired and folk-based work might have triggered some positive response among these ordinary people.

Of course, by choosing to stay in Wisconsin, Niedecker chose to isolate herself from any literary community she might otherwise have enjoyed. Obviously if she was "keeping mum" about her poetry at home because of a lack of comprehension, then she could hardly discuss her work with anyone local. In fact, it seems that until the arrival of Gail Roub, a history teacher at the Fort Atkinson high school who lived first on Black Hawk Island itself, and later in nearby Fort, Niedecker had almost no one with whom to discuss her thoughts. She was usually very careful not to demonstrate her intellect: once she attempted to explain foetus development to a co-worker and the reaction was such that she wrote to Zukofsky, "I'll be tried for witchcraft if I don't watch out" (Letter to Zukofsky, 13 June 1962, *Correspondence*, 314).

This situation must have been difficult for Niedecker, to whom reading and writing were so important: "can't talk poetry or art with em," she remarked of her folk, "they ain't acquainted with such" (Letter to Zukofsky, 31 July 1951, Austin). Niedecker read widely in literature, philosophy, natural history and many other subjects, and must have longed to discuss her latest findings with someone who could react appropriately. Such a dearth of intellectual companionship made it all the more exciting when, in 1960, she formed a relationship with Milwaukee dentist, Harold Hein, a widower. Together they visited art galleries and musuems and embarked on joint reading projects. Niedecker hoped to marry Hein, but was crushed when he revealed his decision not to marry again and the relationship eventually petered out.

A few years later Niedecker met and married Al Millen, whose reading of science-fiction was, apparently, better than nothing. Obviously she had doubts, writing to Zukofsky that she had thought at their meeting, "if this relationship grows it would be something like Lady Chatterly's lover" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 April 1963, *Correspondence*, 332). Later Niedecker commented: "at least I can talk to him about it [literature], my correspondence with writin' people etc. That is an advance, you see, over anybody I've known outside of yourself" and she added, "He's folk and I enjoy it" (Letter to Zukofksy, 7 Jan. 1963, *Correspondence*, 342). Obviously, there were various tensions in the relationship, not least because Niedecker found her ideal working conditions – solitude and silence – difficult to maintain when living at close quarters with someone else.

> Getting up at 4:30 or 5:00 as I do when there is no possible chance of being disturbed and continuing till lunch time with my shell still around me even tho my husband has risen and spread the Milwaukee newspaper out on the table just across from me – and sleeping from 10:00 p.m. to 3:00. And putting stoppers in my ears in the evening when I read while the TV is on. (Letter to Gibson, 7 Mar. 1970, *Truck*)

Perhaps too, Niedecker thought that her husband did not value her work, for she once remarked to Corman, "I can't vouch for Al staying interested in my literary work to the extent of selling it after I'm gone" (Letter to Corman, 27 Dec. 1968, *Between*, 157).

Like many American poets, though perhaps her isolation was more complete than that of most others, Niedecker filled this gap with letters. Her longest and fullest

correspondence was with Louis Zukofsky, "mentor, friend, advisor and critic, as well as a conduit to the publications and theorizing of the other Objectivist poets," as one commentator describes him (Heller, "Light," 49). Indeed, I have already stated that it was after his Objectivist edition of *Poetry* magazine that Niedecker was fired to write to him in New York, and she later said: "I feel that without the Feb. '31 issue of *Poetry* edited by Louis Zukofsky I'd never have developed as a poet" (Letter to Cox, 10 Dec. 1966, "Extracts," 36). Niedecker biographer Glenna Breslin has now revealed that Niedecker not only instigated this lifelong correspondence, which was important for both poets, but as I have already indicated, she actually left Wisconsin for New York City and lived with Zukofsky for several months. This must have been her one experience of living in a big city, and would have given her a rare opportunity to visit many and varied museums, galleries and libraries. But it did not last long. Breslin recounts:

> For the first time in her life, [Niedecker] experienced the stimulating companionship of a group of educated, creative, permissive people. Then she became pregnant. No one seems to know how she felt about the pregnancy, except that she wanted to keep the child. Zukofsky's distress was intense – his life at this time precluded such responsibility. Niedecker was willing to remain unmarried and return to her parents to have the child, but Zukofsky persuaded her against this plan, and she borrowed money from her father to have an abortion. In the end, Niedecker returned to BlackHawk Island because she sensed Zukofsky wished her to leave. (145)

Even the few details given here are suggestive when considering the many aspects of Niedecker's silence and I will return to this incident in later chapters. Certainly the termination of a pregnancy at this stage in Niedecker's experience may have had a long lasting effect. And after such a disastrous first experience, perhaps it is not surprising that Niedecker should keep herself aloof from the community, for a while at least. This incident also sheds some light on the more painful and disturbing undercurrents present in the Niedecker-Zukofsky correspondence. Whatever the negative points of the relationship, it is undoubtedly true that Zukofsky's letters, poems and essays had a great impact on Niedecker and her development as a poet.

Apart from the Zukofsky correspondence, the two other most interesting and sustained exchanges were with Jonathan Williams, poet and publisher, and the poet Cid Corman. Zukofsky encouraged Niedecker to write to Corman and send contributions of her poetry for his small magazine *Origin*, but the ensuing correspondence, perhaps just

as important to Niedecker, was very different to that with Zukofsky. Lisa Pater Faranda, editor of Niedecker's letters to Corman, points to the importance of this new contact for Niedecker: "Though certainly not a substitute for Zukofsky, Corman entered the small circle of her friends, friends she approached not as 'Hank's daughter' or 'Blondie' but as a poet" (*Between*, 5). Although less personal news is exchanged, Niedecker seems to have benefited from this late and more confident, more equal correspondence, discussing her work and that of other poets, and describing to Corman the struggle with form that occupied her for much of this late period. Faranda describes the correspondence as a "powerful confirmation of [Niedecker's] sense of herself as a poet," pointing further to the possible impact on Niedecker's poetry: "Her last years were the most productive of her career" (*Between*, 14).

Niedecker corresponded with several other poets and literary people over the years, and her circle was wide, embracing Japan, England, Scotland and Brazil. Many poets knew and admired her work, and some, including Jonathan Williams, Basil Bunting, Carl Rakosi and Cid Corman, made the effort to visit her at home. For Niedecker, writing letters seemed to be practice for other writing, and incidents recounted in letters often became poems. Further, as one critic points out, "letters offered her the model for the intimate scale, voice and diction of her poems" (Penberthy, "Vertical," 979). Zukofsky once told her, "your letters are your best writing" (Letter to Niedecker, undated fragment, Austin). "In Niedecker's quiet isolation, letters were literally her only means of establishing that vital human contact, her only way of touching others," writes one critic (Faranda, *Between*, 6), while another describes Niedecker as "connecting to other poets and to a large expanse of geography and history through her correspondence, reading, and imagination" (Breslin, 142).

Thus Niedecker enjoyed literary community and dialogue at a distance through correspondences she could take up or turn off as she wished – "Ian [Hamilton Finlay] writes a little often for my cramped life," she once complained (Letter to Zukofsky, 14 Jan. 1962, *Correspondence*, 298). Given the worries she had about her relationships with both Hein and Millen – that she was spending too much of herself on them and couldn't find enough "time and space for poetry" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Apr. 1963,

Correspondence, 332) – this may in fact have been the best and only way for her. Once, after attending a poetry reading, she wrote rather wistfully to Corman about the evening, as if regretting her status as "an isolate dot on the page" (Letter to Corman, 2 Mar. 1967, *Between*, 114). Yet although her sustained correspondence with other writers like Zukofsky and Corman were very valuable to her as a poet, Niedecker seems to have felt no urge to involve herself more closely by leaving home to seek literary companionship and support (one critic points to "the self-preservative instinct of a woman artist who lacked the temperament to contend at close range with the likes of the crabby, self-involved Zukofsky," Clausen, "Niedecker," 11). Certainly as she grew older, Niedecker seemed to covet her solitude and turn away from social contact and it became rare for her to attend even such infrequent literary events as occurred locally. She once excused herself to Morgan Gibson, saying, "Poetry comes first but for me within more calm than such a meeting would provide" (Letter to Gibson, 24 Feb. 1965, *Truck*).

Many of her literary correspondents tried to interest Niedecker in poetry readings but while such readings became increasingly popular and many other poets travelled to meet and make new audiences for their work, Niedecker continued to hold strong views about *not* reading. "The world is mad, MAD on this subject," she complained (Letter to Corman, 12 Jul. 1967, *Between*, 127) but admitted, "I'm in the minority with my views," (Letter to Corman, 18 May 1967, *Between*, 123). In general, Niedecker only attended readings by poets she knew personally and she steadfastly refused all invitations to read her own work, explaining to one correspondent: "I really do not approve of reading aloud or listening to someone read" (Letter to Cox, 23 Nov. 1970, "Extracts," 42). Of course, Niedecker rarely left home, and her natural shyness, heightened by her stay-at-home habits, must also have inclined her away from such public displays: "with me a tendency to greater drama if spoken (aware of not simply audience but mixed and nerve-crossed audience, of somewhat inattentive audience)" (Letter to Corman, 3 May 1967, *Between*, 121). But perhaps more of a deciding factor was her poor sight, which deteriorated later in her life to the stage of being almost a disability – "I read most of the time with a magnifying glass" (Letter to Corman, 18 May 1967, *Between*, 123).

Quite apart from these physical or personal reasons, however, there was a poetic basis for this particular silence. Exasperated with people encouraging her to make tapes of herself reading[1] Niedecker defended her choice – "I *write*, I don't do all those other things" (Letter to Zukofsky, 24 Feb. 1963, *Correspondence*, 329). Further, Niedecker felt there was "more in the printed word" (Letter to Corman, 18 May 1967, *Between*, 123) and the striking visual forms so integral to her poetry would have been all but lost in an oral rendition, as I will show in chapter 8. "Poems are for one person to another, spoken thus, or read silently," she maintained (Letter to Corman, 3 May 1967, *Between*, 121) and preferred to think that each reader might approach the poems in "silence", not in an impersonal meeting hall full of people.

This is not to say that Niedecker shunned reading aloud for private purposes, indeed she saw sound and music as important to poetry (I will look more closely at this in chapter 9), and once even admitted, "actually I say my verse to myself a million times, sometimes whisper it 'aloud' for moosic" (quoted in Nero, 138). Only Corman managed to persuade her to read, and during his visit shortly before her death he taped her reading several of her latest poems. After this experience Niedecker felt she understood rather better the differences between poetry for reading on the page and that for reading aloud, and I will discuss this further in chapter 9. However, the reading was admitted by all parties to be a bad one, and Corman has never released the tape. Neither did Niedecker change her mind about reading; she may have made some concessions, but her views on this issue were firmly held and her public silence remained unbroken.

Niedecker also refused to take part in any social or promotional activities connected with her poetry, remarking, "the social-business-butterfly kind of thing is a blank page to me" (Letter to Corman, 27 Dec. 1968, *Between*, 182) and she was wary of any brash publicity campaigns: "*North Central* is on Fifth Avenue . . . These moves to *push* me will always bother me a bit" (Letter to Corman, 21 Feb. 1969, *Between*, 184). Diffident though she may sometimes have been in approaching editors and other writers (a situation complicated by gender), Niedecker was sure of her own poetic merit and was determined to reach the best possible audience.

Yet her apparent wish for anonymity (her refusal to create herself as a public figure) caused Niedecker to neglect one area in which she might legitimately have promoted herself and her work – criticism, explication and theory. Other poets, perhaps especially those who begin labelled as "avant-garde" or "marginal", become important to the literary world as much for their theoretical or critical writing as for their poetry; William Carlos Williams, for example, or Charles Olson, even Zukofsky. Niedecker wrote only two critical essays (one on Zukofsky and another on Cid Corman) and, as I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, never formally discussed her own work or poetics. One critic compares her with the British poet, Basil Bunting, remarking, "unlike Zukofsky neither had much taste for theoretical formulations" (O'Brien, 43). And although Niedecker writes about her work in letters (almost the only source we have) even the editor of Niedecker's letters to Corman notes that "theoretical discussions" in the letters are "rarely long-winded" (Faranda, *Between*, 10). This may have been another deliberate choice on Niedecker's part, a decision taken because of strong personal convictions, as with reading aloud, and indeed she once wrote: "I'd always rather see poems than comments on poems" (Letter to Morgan Gibson, 15 Nov. 1965, *Truck*). Talking to Gail Roub about her own poems, she admitted: "It's very difficult for me to talk about them. When I'm writing it's as if my mind is operating just below the level of consciousness" (quoted in Roub, 38).

However, Penberthy indirectly suggests another reason for this silence when she states that "Zukofsky gave his life's work a gravity that Niedecker was unwilling to ascribe to her own" (*Correspondence*, 39). That is, Zukofsky, the confident, academic, male artist was willing to openly champion his work (and himself) as serious and important and to promote it as such, while Niedecker, folk and female, was not. It is interesting here to recall what Tillie Olsen has to say about the growth and development of male and female writers.

> How much it takes to become a writer. . . . circumstances, time, development of craft – but beyond that: how much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one's right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, to cleave to, to find the form for one's own life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman. (27)

Once more, gender may be part of the reasons for Niedecker's diffidence, her choice of anonymity rather than fame, withdrawal rather than promotion. And yet this very reluctance to put herself forward has led to more gender-related problems.

Penberthy, again apparently not completely aware of the implications of what she is saying, comments: "The survival of Niedecker's poetry is in fact almost entirely due to the work of poets, who first recognized and lauded her . . . Poets published her too" ("Vertical," 979). These poets were, of course, all male. Niedecker relied on them for promotion and publication and was not in a position to argue with them – over anything, as I will show in chapter 5. For although Tandy Sturgeon maintains that "the correspondence reveals relationships with well-established poets and editors based on an exchange between equals" (5), this is unfortunately not always, or even generally, the case. And Penberthy goes so far as to admit that "if the poems minimize the role of the poet, the letters reveal a corresponding reluctance to announce her vocation" (*Correspondence*, 73); perhaps Penberthy refers here to Niedecker's wish to keep the fact that she wrote poetry from the local people, but it is true that Niedecker, despite writing about her work in letters, is reluctant to elevate her writing to the status of what Penberthy calls a "vocation". This is why the later correspondence with Corman is so important, in its acceptance of the serious commitment of both parties to the reading and writing of poetry.

However, Niedecker continued to struggle for some kind of exposure. Although her publishing chronology shows a gap of almost twenty years between her first and second books, she published material regularly in small magazines. She was discriminating in her choice of the periodicals to which she sent material, remarking once to Zukofsky, "I'm not too pleased with the look of the mag For Paul is in. The poets in it seem too 'educated' and sophisticated" (Letter to Zukofsky, 29 "Septober" 1955, *Correspondence*, 224). Thus it is with some justification that DuPlessis describes Niedecker as "an intellectual carefully choosing her audience" (101), and this careful choice may have contributed to her lack of exposure. "The whole thing is," wrote Niedecker to Corman, "there are only a couple of periodicals in the whole world now that you (anyone) would want your poems published in" (Letter to Corman, 17 Jan.

Between, 214). And though Corman's publication *Origin* was presumably one of the few, and Corman was always willing to publish Niedecker's work, she was aware that this too could be a problem, as she explained to Williams: "He wants to print just about everything I have all the time now – of course I feel its better to try and spread oneself around so I don't send him everything" (Letter to Williams, 28 Nov. 1966, Jargon).

Again gender is a factor in the problems of publishing. On one occasion, Niedecker refused an offer of publication, explaining to the publisher: "I feel I shouldn't go ahead with printing. If you had more time, if Louie [Zukofsky]'s book were out and in the hands of the publishers, if I didn't have to trouble Edw. Dahlberg or [Carlos] Williams for a testimonial, altho they'd do it . . . perhaps another time" (Letter to Williams, 29 Dec. 1956, Jargon). This may have been Niedecker's own decision but it demonstrates clearly the tension present in her relationship with Zukofsky, and the apprehension she felt about approaching male writers on her own behalf – both problems particularly accentuated because of her gender. In 1970 Niedecker sent a manuscript to James Laughlin for consideration. He replied that "the group did not seem long enough" and mentioned "interests of economy" before remarking, "it occurred to me that . . . I had better check out with [Jonathan Williams] how he might feel about the possibility of our coming into the publishing picture for you". Williams' reaction seemed negative, and not wanting to upset him by "putting foot in his territory", Laughlin returned Niedecker's manuscript, which he had described as "certainly publishable in terms of quality" (Letter to Niedecker, 9 Nov. 1970, Jargon). The manuscript was *Harpsichord & Salt Fish*, finally published more than twenty years later, and containing some of Niedecker's most interesting and experimental work.

The correspondence with Jonathan Williams shows clearly Niedecker's frustration with the publishing process: its financial problems (she refused, indeed could not afford, to pay for a book of her poems to be printed); the length of time it took; and the disappointing end product. It took many years for the book Williams undertook to publish (*T&G*) to emerge and Niedecker, feeling that her time might be running out, wrote complaining about the delay: "I'm 65 (this coming May) and I'm weaker than Emily Dickinson" (Letter to Williams, 24 Jan. 1968, Jargon). She also remarked to

Corman that publishers "don't see time as I do who haven't too much more of it" (Letter to Corman, 24 Oct. 1967, *Between*, 134). Despite the myth of Niedecker as shy and unworldly, she always knew what she wanted and was not afraid to set out her requirements clearly; in the case of Williams, she was not prepared to let her grievances drop because of their friendship and she even put aside her assumption of female deference to a more powerful male. "I've no wish to have the book done by anyone but you," she wrote to Williams, "but it's becoming a little embarassing so far as date of publication is concerned" (Letter to Williams, 24 Jan. 1968, Jargon). Once the book appeared, the correspondence soon tailed off.

Again, she was discriminating about the publishers of her collections: "one must be careful with whom one associates" (Letter to Zukofsky, 11 Jul. 1961, *Correspondence*, 285) she wrote when she was unexpectedly contacted by Jessie McGuffie of Wild Hawthorn Press, who eventually published *My Friend Tree*. Her standards were high and she was never entirely satisfied with any of the published collections of her work. Niedecker wrote to both Zukofsky and Williams about her "unwee happiness over My Friend Tree" (Letter to Williams, 31 Dec. 1961, Jargon), when the published version omitted several poems – two of which Niedecker described as "each in its way, I feel, the best I've done" (Letter to Williams, 31 Dec. 1961, Jargon) – she wished included.

> I must inform you of my disappointment – they are leaving out Ash woods and I rose from marsh mud and three tiny ones. I told them they can't do this as I wanted to think of this as a Selected even though it would not say so on it. It seems the artist failed to draw for these and besides it brings expense down to omit. I said I'd send $25 if they'd include Ash woods – after all if this doesn't belong with folk where does it? Or $50 if they'd put both in – and do it without pictures! They answer the book is too near ready to do any of this . . . (Letter to Zukofsky, 31 Dec. 1961, *Correspondence*, 296)

She also described *My Life By Water* as "Fulcrum's next mutilation" (Letter to Zukofsky, 27 Dec. 1968, *Correspondence*, 356), perhaps because they refused to print "Paean to Place" as she wanted it (see Letter to Corman, 22 Oct. 1968, *Between*, 175). But at least she was being published.

A close friend described Niedecker's worries about erasure thus:

> Of immense importance to Lorine was the ongoing publication of her poems. . . . I sensed in Lorine a quiet anxiety that her work might be overlooked, and this bothered her, not because she sought public adulation, but because she had a very clear idea of who she was, what a rare talent she possessed, and how much she had achieved in spite of great personal difficulties. (Roub, 40).

Certainly Niedecker was aware that not to be published would mean never breaking the public silence, and that even publication was not enough – she talked of "the great everpresent possibility that our work may not be read" (Letter to Corman, 14 Feb. 1968, *Between*, 153). What Niedecker really hoped for, towards the end of her life, was that some large publishing house would collect her life's work in an edition that would remain in print. This wish has not yet been fulfilled.

Recently, Niedecker has been included in an anthology of American poetry since 1950, subtitled *Innovators and Outsiders*, where the editor has tried to bring together many poets who began by being neglected and overlooked; he points out that many have now been given due recognition and publication.

> Of the poets now deceased, more than half died with most of their work unpublished or out of print. Yet, within a few years after their deaths, nearly all of them were recognized as having been among the central poets of their time. Most are now decked with critical apparatus from the academy – book-length studies, biographies, annotated texts, collections of letters, bibliographies – and some of them have become the models for the new generation of establishment poets to imitate. (Weinberger, xii)

It is true that some of Niedecker's letters have been published (ten and twenty years after her death) but there is no biography[2], no book-length study (though I hope this study may be a step to rectifying this situation), no bibliography, and most importantly, no annotated text – no complete text at all.

In fact, Niedecker is now all but invisible. Worse, where she appears, she is often misrepresented. Of course, it is rare that Niedecker makes it into any anthologies. We must remember "the political and social conditions within which anthologists work" (Tompkins, 191), which bar Niedecker on several counts, including gender and class – and if she does it is the same old poems we find representing her to the reading public.[3] Poems which uphold her image as a poet of place and nature, a whimsical, idiosyncratic, folk poet who lived all her life in one place, and showed it. And of course, the general reading public does not know how misleading such images can be. One theorist discusses

the problems of authors undergoing similar kinds of "rewriting" by critics and biographers.

> In the past, as in the present, rewriters created images of a writer, a work, a period, a genre, sometimes even a whole literature. These images existed side by side with the realities they competed with, but the images always seemed to reach more people than the corresponding realities did, and they most certainly do so now. (Lefevere, 5)

Eliot Weinberger's anthology, *American Poetry Since 1950,* claims to reinstate marginalized poets and show some of their most important and innovative work (not necessarily their most popular and well-known). Yet he mentions in his discussion of the "history" of American poetry and poetics only those names already known and recovered to the canon – Carlos Williams, Pound, Olson. Niedecker, and the few other female poets included, are not named or singled out in this discussion, and it is not even acknowledged that they may have received treatment different from that of their male counterparts.

Similar problems occur in editing collections of a single author's work. "Editors are active shapers of the canon, whose differing aims and assumptions determine what will seem central and what peripheral" (Tompkins, 188). Certainly, in *The Granite Pail,* now the only remaining Niedecker in print, Corman's preferences are clear in the editing and although the book is well-presented and makes an excellent introduction to Niedecker's better-known poetry, it fails to capture the full range of her work. Robert Bertholf's *From This Condensery* was clearly intended to counter this kind of selective editing and its scope is admirable. However, in practical terms the book is appalling, and in any case it is now out of print. Bertholf includes different versions of certain poems (chosen by unknown criteria, as several poems existing in several versions are not reproduced), and gives disproportionate space to the "For Paul" group (an interesting subject for further and detailed study but not particularly edifying to the reader *en bloc*). Such misrepresentation confuses as much as it illuminates.

Yet it is in the field of criticism that Niedecker is most blatantly and most damagingly misrepresented, though several commentators – usually women – are now trying to redress the balance. Tompkins' description of "the male dominated scholarly

tradition that controls both the canon of American literature (. . .) and the critical perspective that interprets the canon for society" is certainly relevant here (123). The main critical approach has been patronizing, tending towards sentimental biography and speculation, perpetuating a false mythic picture of Niedecker, and sticking to such subjects as fit this restricted view – place and locale, nature and environment. The full scope of Niedecker's work has been ignored, especially her treatment of social and political issues, and of women: poems dealing with these subjects are usually omitted from or misrepresented in publications and critical discussions. Little that is constructive or detailed has been said about Niedecker's poetics, and the same handful of poems are used as examples of her work. I will examine these problems in more detail in the following chapters.

"Poets alone can rarely put themselves on the scholarly or critical agenda; to do so they must write criticism, give interviews, network, make movements, perform acts of cultural flourish," writes DuPlessis (99). As we have seen, Niedecker did none of these, and in choosing to keep such a low profile she certainly may have contributed to her own erasure. However, I believe that the selective editing she has suffered, and her misrepresentation by critics are major factors in keeping her a "minor" and largely ignored poet. DuPlessis also remarks that "Niedecker has not been visible as a participant in American poetry because her 'school' of poets, the 'Objectivist' cohort . . . is also virtually invisible" (99). This situation has hardly changed in the two years since DuPlessis was writing but as I have intimated in my introduction, Niedecker fits more generally into a tradition of American poetry from Pound and Carlos Williams, through Objectivists like Zukofsky and Reznikoff, and Black Mountain writers such as Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and Denise Levertov. Other poets in this tradition, although previously neglected by critics and canon-makers have now achieved canon status or are at least receiving increasing critical attention. I also hope to show in the following chapters that Niedecker has links with several other traditions of poetry, and that her categorization as an Objectivist "hanger-on" can be limiting as well as fruitful.

She may have chosen silence in many areas of her poetic life, but Niedecker never looked for and always tried to guard against the silencing of her poetic voice. Thus the

title of this section has turned out to be double-edged and Niedecker, like many other women writers, has been "kept mum" – silenced not only by the poetry establishment but even by those who claim to admire her work.

II. "Light and silence": Niedecker's critical reception.

2. PLACE: "I rose from marsh mud".

In this part of my thesis I aim to demonstrate the misrepresentative and extremely slanted criticism and comments on Niedecker's work – the patterns of what I have called "light and silence". Chapters 2 and 3 deal with subjects or themes in Niedecker's poetry that have been heavily emphasized by commentators, while 4 and 5 examine things that have been all but ignored: in these chapters I hope to suggest how and why this situation has come about and what effects it has had on Niedecker's reputation as a poet. However, I do not intend merely to review what other critics have said about Niedecker and her work, though this can be a useful and interesting exercise. I aim to give some idea of the areas previous criticism has mapped and to synthesize what has been said on certain themes, but rather than retreading old ground, I hope to fill in gaps and shift emphases, as well as pushing further where others have not gone far enough and exploring more fully the areas so beloved by critics.

Many critics point out the importance of place and locale for Niedecker and I would certainly agree with Jan Clausen that Niedecker's work is "resolutely and fruitfully rooted in a single place" ("Niedecker," 11). However, this insistence on Niedecker as a "local" poet from a provincial backwater seems to be one of the reasons she is considered a minor poet. Even when praising Niedecker for her acute observation of place and the intensity arising from this involvement with her locale, critics imply that this local focus must limit Niedecker's poetry, keeping it small-scale and insignificant, lacking the breadth and scope required for "greatness". Even Gail Roub, one of the few locals who knew about Niedecker's poetic career felt this to be a problem: "I probably resisted the idea that a local poet could be great" (38).

Commentators have chosen most often to demonstrate Niedecker's involvement with place by referring to her long poem sequence, "Lake Superior" but this poem is not about Niedecker's locale, written as it was after a motoring trip round Lake Superior. It seems significant to me that critics are more comfortable discussing "Lake Superior" rather than, for example, "Paean to Place", a poem of similar length and structure, and

one which many critics have praised highly; the stumbling block seems to be that it deals specifically with Niedecker's growing up in her home place. Yet while avoiding detailed discussion of place and locale in Niedecker, commentators simultaneously insist on it as one, if not the most important feature in her work. "Although much of Niedecker's poetry reflects her simple small town life," remarks Phyllis Walsh, "readers who perceive her only as a regional poet overlook a poet of complexity who was a keen observer of power politics on many levels, and a reader of considerable erudition" (7). But a reader guided by general Niedecker criticism would find it difficult *not* to make this mistake, since commentators designate Niedecker as a "local" (implied, "minor") poet while refusing to take in the whole range of her work, much of which deals with wider issues.

Some of the more perceptive have been aware of this tendency – "We need to stress the value of 'local'," writes Richard Caddel, "as in 'local writer': to defend it from charges of parochiality, or the faint condescension of 'in spite of its limited scope' " ("Common," 47). Frederick Eckman reacts more strongly, pointing out that readers and critics should be aware that Niedecker's "shy, reclusive, mostly uneventful life on the banks of the Rock River north of Fort Atkinson, Wis., is part and parcel of her artistry – not some regrettable accident". Likewise Faranda describes the extent to which "being a poet in America is a matter of choice, hard work, and, for someone like Lorine Niedecker, a rugged commitment to the realities of time and place" (*Between*, 1). As we have seen in chapter 1, Niedecker chose to stay on Black Hawk Island close to home and to her sources, and it would be difficult to overemphasize the influence of place and locale in her work. Unfortunately, despite the fact that this did not mean she in any way limited herself to local concerns, this choice of Niedecker's seems to have been a major factor in her misrepresentation and classification as "minor". (Niedecker was unimpressed by one University library's treatment of *North Central*, explaining that it had been "placed among regional materials" and commenting, "I should ask them if by region they mean London, Wisconsin, New York or ––", Letter to Gibson, 18 Dec. 1969, *Truck*).

However, although other American (male) poets, most notably William Carlos Williams, have shown a comparable interest in and involvement with place and locale,

they do not experience similar attitudes because of it. In her study of *American Fiction 1790-1860*, Tompkins notes that "because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is absent from the canon, it isn't 'there' to be referred to even when it fulfills a man's theory to perfection. Hence its exclusion from critical discourse is perpetuated automatically, and absence begets itself in a self-confirming cycle of neglect" (140). Bearing this comment in mind, it is interesting to look at Carlos Williams' ideas about place and locale in relation to Niedecker, especially as regards this disparity in their reception.

Niedecker read and admired Carlos Williams, and was greatly influenced by his work and perhaps also by his ideas. When other writers of his generation such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were settling in Europe, Carlos Williams chose to remain in America, eventually writing the long poem *Paterson* about his place and community. Similarly, Faranda writes of Niedecker that, "she remained isolated from established centers of literary activity in order to write the poetry of the American idiom and modern experience" ("Letter," 14). In describing his aims and methods for *Paterson*, Carlos Williams said he would "use only the material that concerned the locale that I occupied" (*Interviews*, 71). He went on to explain:

> Because I knew about the locale of that city [Paterson], I chose it, deliberately chose it to write about. . . . I wanted to write it in a way which would be characteristic not only of the place but of me. I walked around the streets. I went on Sundays in summer when people were using the park, and I listened to their conversation as much as I could. I saw whatever they did and made it part of the poem. (*Interviews*, 72)

Niedecker observed and recorded the people around her in precisely the manner Carlos Williams describes, as I will show later in this chapter.

Further, the local can carry with it a wider context; as one Niedecker commentator, paraphrasing Carlos Williams, puts it, "the concrete becomes the universal" (Gibson, 121). That is, how a particular person in a particular place reacts or behaves in a particular situation can point to more general conclusions about most people. Carlos Williams wrote of Paterson (the place) that "it would be as itself, locally, and so like every other place in the world" (preface to *Paterson*), and in the "Preface" to the poem itself he explains he wishes "To make a start/ out of particulars/ and make them general" (*Paterson*, book 1). The particular can strike us with more effect than the

general, as in the poem, "Grampa's got his old age pension" (*Life*, 30), where we recognize from a specific example the loneliness of old people living alone. As I will show in chapter 4, Niedecker often describes social problems in the particular rather than the general in order to gain the kind of sharp edged detail lacking in a vague generality. In this way, the particular need not always be the local, or rather, it need not always apply to the local.

Yet can a poet represent modern experience (as surely all successful poets must do in some way) by using the local to show the universal if that modern experience is urban and the poet's locale is provincial and rural? This seems to be yet another reason for Niedecker's continuing marginality: as urban living is emphasized more and more in our Western culture, rural and provincial areas and those living in them are dismissed as insignificant or irrelevant. I will look again at this problem in the next chapter when I discuss nature and environment and critical perceptions of "nature" poetry. Once more, I point to the whole range of Niedecker's work which deals with global, social and political issues relevant to any reader, wherever they live.

However, this problem does not apply only to Niedecker studies: American and other "colonial" writers challenged and still challenge the English centre of literature, as did and do Welsh, Irish and Scottish writers, both by their "provincial" nature and by their differences in experience, dialect, and so on. Niedecker's essential American-ness challenges the centre of English literaure, but her folk base and her insistence on place and locale also challenge the urban and literary centres of American literature. It is interesting that Niedecker admired the Scottish poet Robert Burns, who also encountered problems because of his choice of provinciality and folk.

Apart from the difference of gender, one critic's description of Burns as "Insisting on the importance of his local vernacular, writing a deliberately impure language, deeply inscribing himself in a culture outside the prevailing metropolitan one" (Crawford, 89)[1] could apply equally to Niedecker. Like Niedecker, Burns used dialect and local place names, drawing attention to the (geographical) origin of the text, indeed, making that locale part of the experience or meaning of the text. The choice of provinciality in either Burns or Niedecker subtly subverts centralized urban literature by providing an

alternative experience and way of writing that may be opposed to either urbanity or centralization, or both. Burns and Niedecker were also alike in that although they were marginalized in many ways, they managed to find their niche and settle in it, however false or shallow this compartment may have been: "In terms of literary, social, and actual geography, Burns knew his place, and manoeuvered himself into it with skill" (Crawford, 96); Niedecker performed the same manouevres, but, perhaps because of her gender, she was not as successful in remaining visible on the map of literature. Both have also been labelled as what Robert Crawford calls "a mere child of nature" (97), Sturgeon "a naive country 'savant' " (12). (Caddel's article on Niedecker and John Clare – "Things Held in Common" – provides another interesting and significant parallel of this kind, though there is no evidence that Niedecker herself admired Clare as she did Burns).

However, Crawford also suggests that "Burns marginalized himself in a way that was to make him fruitful for a wide spectrum of later writers – not only Wordsworth and the Romantics, but also Whitman, MacDiarmid and other Modernists" (89), and this has important ramifications for placing Niedecker within traditions of American poetry. As Crawford points out:

> . . . most of the High Modernists did not come from the centre of English culture . . . Their language is not that of English gentlemen, nor is it meant to be. . . . it brought back to the centre of high art . . . provincial improprieties . . . It is this demotic aspect of Modernism which constitutes one of the movement's most important legacies . . . (270)

Certainly place names or local idiom have been used by poets from Walt Whitman to Carlos Williams to Olson, and though her folk base may be original and more pronounced than other American poets, modern or otherwise, Niedecker is far from alone in taking on these features. In his anthology, *American Poetry Since 1950*, Weinberger remarks that with the rise of Modernism "America became again – for the first time since Whitman – a subject for its own poetry" (400). Thus we can see that Breslin's description of Niedecker as "a second generation modernist who applied the techniques of the new poetry to her own watery stretch of southeastern Wisconsin with quietly spectacular results" (141) is much more than mere rhetoric.

As regards Niedecker's "folk" element, she wrote to Corman that she saw *New Goose* as "folk inspired" (Letter to Corman, 23 Jan. 1961, *Between*, 27) and explained to Kenneth Cox that it was "based on the folk – and a desire to get down direct speech (Williams influence. . .)" (Letter to Cox, 10 Dec. 1966, "Extracts," 36). Certainly Carlos Williams spoke of "language modified by *our* environment, the American environment" (*Interviews*, 59) and explained how and why poets might want to use such language:

> I've always wanted to fit poetry into the life around us because I love poetry. I'm not the type of poet who looks only at the rare thing. I want to use the words we speak and describe the things we see, as far as it can be done . . . Poetry should be brought into the world where we live and not be so recondite, so removed from the people . . . Using common words in a rare manner will advance the cause of the Poem infinitely. (*Interviews*, 63)

On this last point Niedecker wrote to Jonathan Williams in a similar vein, remarking how Zukofsky had included her in his *Test of Poetry* "in the folk category" and she quotes Zukofsky as saying: "The less poetry is concerned with the everyday existence and the rhythmic talents of a people the less readable that poetry is likely to be" (Letter to Williams, 19 Feb. 1964, Jargon). Niedecker once commented, "H. D. has a new book, not, I understand, of the common speech" (Letter to Zukofsky, 25 Apr. 1945, *Correspondence*, 132).

As we have seen, an interest in the demotic or dialect is part of American poetry's inheritance from provincial poets like Burns, from Whitman and from Modernism. Whitman once wrote that "really good poetry is always (. . .) the result of a national spirit" (672) and described language as "something arising out of the work, needs, ties, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, . . . it has bases broad and low, close to the ground" (1166). (It is interesting that Niedecker described her own poetry in much the same way when Wild Hawthorn Press were publishing *My Friend Tree*: "I can't make out that they are interested in much else but short poems close to the earth and people and everyday events," Letter to Zukofsky, 26 Aug. 1961, *Correspondence*, 289). Niedecker owned Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (see "I knew a clean man", *Life* 58), and when she hoped to have a new collection of her poems published she significantly suggested as an alternative title to *T&G*, "The Common Air, start of a line of Whitman's" (Letter to Williams, 17 Sep. 1965, Jargon). Niedecker also strongly stated her belief that

"all poetry comes from the folk if it's to be vital and original" (Letter to Florence Dollase, c.1946, quoted in Knox, 20).

Thus it is not surprising that Niedecker often wrote about the people around her – she was part of a community and through her poetry she portrays what it is like to live in that community, what kind of people it has and how the place has made them who they are. This portrayal is detailed and understanding, Niedecker describes the people and tells us what they do – "the women hold jobs –/ clean house, cook, raise children, bowl/ and go to church" ("In the great snowfall before the bomb" *Life*, 61) – she explores their way of life, their concerns and prejudices. Much of the vitality and conviction of these poems derives from Niedecker's interest in the way these people talk and what they talk about. Niedecker's "folk idiom" is one of the main features of her style and Cox identified it as such in the beginning of Niedecker criticism, saying of the poems: "Their language is colloquial and elliptical to a degree that registers the feel of a place and the personality of a speaker before meaning. It is the speech of the American people, whittled clean" ("Niedecker," 169). Of course, Niedecker lived and worked in her community all her life and was well qualified to observe and reproduce its idiom.

> I worked the print shop
> right down among em
> the folk from whom all poetry flows
> and dreadfully much else ("In the great snowfall before the bomb" *Life*, 61)

"Not surprisingly," states Penberthy, "this poetry based on the transcribed vernacular led [Niedecker] back to her own biological folk" (*Correspondence*, 41). In the same letter to Cox in which she described *New Goose* as folk-influenced, Niedecker described her mother's natural folk idiom: "here was my mother . . . speaking whole chunks of down-to-earth (o very earthy) magic, descendent for sure of Mother Goose (I her daughter, sits and floats, you know)" (Letter to Cox, 10 Dec. 1966, "Extracts," 36). (In "Well, spring overflows the land" [*Life*, 33] Daisy Niedecker describes her family thus: "My man's got nothing but leaky boats./ My daughter, writer, sits and floats."). Perhaps it was as a result of her relationship with her mother that Niedecker felt easy about transcribing as well as speaking folk idiom, for Daisy Niedecker's increasing deafness (which became complete when Lorine was in her early twenties) meant that the

two communicated by writing notes. Niedecker's father is also recognized as an important factor for her folk base in the poem "He lived – childhood summers" (*Life*, 55).

> . . . he'd given her a source
>   to sustain her –
> a weedy speech,
>   a marshy retainer.

"Paean to Place" (*Life*, 14) demonstrates the influence of family and home on Niedecker's poetic identity. This poem sequence has been highly praised by some critics but Niedecker herself said little about it, relating to Corman, "this thing about *place* – was moved to write 15 pages 'Paean to Place' " (Letter to Corman, 15 Dec. 1967, *Between*, 171) and later speaking of the poem as "a lush, mush-music but like this place" (Letter to Corman, 1968, *Between*, 176). It would certainly seem that after a lifetime of writing, Niedecker's "thing about place" finally found full expression in "Paean to Place", written in the late sixties, a few years before her death. Yet the poem also provides an account of Niedecker's personal and poetic growth – she described it as her "life long poem" (Letter to Corman, 15 Dec. 1967, *Between*, 170) and its subjects as "my origins, in memory of my parents etc." (Letter to Williams, 2 Jul. 1969, Jargon) – both of which must have been shaped by her experience of place.

Yet the full importance of the folk element in Niedecker has still not been recognized. Niedecker once wrote, "I probably show a folk base . . . so far as I see it it might be my only claim to difference between most poets and meself" (Letter to Williams, 10 Aug. 1970, Jargon). Perhaps because "folk" is inferred as minor or naive Penberthy reads this negatively: "Niedecker's habit of belittling her achievement must be kept in mind when reading statements such as [the above]" (*Correspondence*, 4) but taking into consideration Niedecker's often ambivalent attitude when speaking of her own work to male colleagues (I will discuss this in chapter 5), and reading between the lines slightly, I feel that this is an important and revealing self-evaluation. Although Niedecker felt some discomfort with her situation as a poet in her own community, she herself was one of the folk and it is certainly significant to her poetics that she continued to identify herself as a "folk" poet. There seemed to be a slight note of disappointment

when she related to one correspondent, "I wrote Ian [Hamilton Finlay] immediately after seeing *The Dancers Inherit the Party* as I thought he was absorbed with the folk as I've always been. I see now his interests are various" (Letter to Gibson, 3 Nov. 1965, *Truck*).

The importance of the function of observer and recorder of folk speech to Niedecker's poetry may not be widely recognized; of course, many of the poems read like overheard conversations but the reader has no way of knowing how genuine or manufactured this impression is. Explaining her early poetic practice, Niedecker once wrote, "Usually now, the poems are pretty well completed before coming to paper, since they are, very often, reproductions of speech" (Letter to Abbott, 1 Jul. 1946, Buffalo) and we find from the correspondence with Zukofsky that a number of poems did in fact emerge directly from real conversations. Zukofksy wrote to Niedecker about "literally copying down B. P. [Daisy Niedecker]," going on to remark, "The *spitbox* lines make a perfect poem [see "The museum man" *Life*, 28]. You have a goldmine of verse there!" (Letter to Niedecker, fragment 22, undated, Austin) and Niedecker once commented "Time for BP to write me a poem" (Letter to Zukofsky, 25 Apr. 1949, *Correspondence*, 159). In letters to Zukofsky, Niedecker mentions at least four other poems which arose from actual speech ("Regards to Mr. Glover", "Old mother turns blue and from us", "Two old men", "A student")[2] and in a letter to Corman she encloses a poem ("I married") which she describes as having written "from a folk conversation and I suppose from some of my own dark forebodings" (Letter to Corman, 20 Jul. 1967, *Between*, 129).

Clausen states that "throughout [Niedecker's] writing life, but especially at the start, she delighted in making brief, highly condensed poems from 'folk conversation' " ("Niedecker," 11) and although Niedecker's first two collections, *New Goose* (1943) and *My Friend Tree* (1961 – this collection comprised many of the *New Goose* poems plus more recent work), have the highest concentration of "folk" poems, Niedecker continued to write poems from folk speech until her death in 1970 ("I married" was part of the last collection *Harpsichord & Salt Fish*; Niedecker also described group III of the "For Paul" poems as "the folk group, the American group, even!" Letter to Zukofsky, 6 Aug. 1951, *Correspondence*, 184). Of course, it is difficult to say how many changes Niedecker

made to the actual words of the conversations she used, perhaps for reasons of poetic form or rhyme, but a letter from Zukofsky suggests that such changes may have been minimal – "No need," he wrote, "to quazify what is in yr. blood" (Letter to Niedecker, fragment 89, undated, Austin).

Niedecker was obviously fascinated by speech and her method of transcribing "depended on an opportunistic ear, ready for the irregular sounds of living speech, for any undiluted linguistic possibility" (Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 43). As well as directly recording folk conversation, Niedecker involved voice in her work by frequently using personae who "speak" the poems, generally in monologue though often the single speaker will seem to be in dialogue with another. The early dramatic pieces ("Domestic and Unavoidable", "Fancy Another Day Gone", and "The President of the Holding Company" *Collected*, 120, 124 and 132, respectively) explore voice and conversation, and must have developed Niedecker's interest in speech and the spoken word. Further, it is interesting to note that by recording the voices of others in her poetry, Niedecker subdued her own authorial voice. The lack of authorial presence in the transcribed folk poems indicates yet again her tendency to self-effacement, perhaps indeed she chose such a method for this very reason. However, as Penberthy points out, "the paradox of this suppressed authorial presence is that the poems are by no means depersonalized" (*Correspondence*, 73), far from it – these poems are saturated with individuality and human idiosyncrasy, brought into the poems through the medium of voice.

The poem "The museum man!" (*Life,* 28) seems to be entirely composed of recorded folk speech. Though the only real colloquialism is "Pa's spitbox", the rest of the words might be used in everyday conversation. There are no obvious additions by the poet, but even if Niedecker has added nothing to it, she has made it a poem by setting it out in lines on the page. This may not seem very impressive to some but again there is a parallel with Carlos Williams – I think here particularly of his poem "This is just to say", a note left in the kitchen for his wife. Carlos Williams defends the use of such everyday events and dialogues for poetry thus:

> . . . we can't believe that we . . . could have anything happen in our lives important enough to be put down in words and given a form. But everything in our lives, if it is sufficiently authentic to our lives and touches us deeply enough with a certain

> amount of feeling, is capable of being organized into a form which can be a poem. (*Interviews*, 17)

The energy of this poem, its "authenticity" or "feeling" comes from the emotion of the speaker, indicated by the two exclamation marks at the ends of the first two lines. Repetition of the phrase "stone on top" emphasizes the force of her antagonism toward the spitbox and the idea of burying it with a stone on top brings in further folk elements (myths about ghosts and haunting) as well as adding wry humour to the poem – the power of the spitbox is so strong that without such precautions it might return even from the grave.

"Regards to Mr. Glover" (*Collected*, 171), is also apparently made up entirely of folk speech (only the words "not always/ does one feel this intimate" in parenthesis might be inserted by the poet), though this poem is not a record of one block of speech but a kind of collage of a longer conversation put together in an almost surrealist manner. This form gives an impression of the flow of speech and the random thoughts that can crop up in conversation, and ellipses may indicate where the line of speech is broken, though some of the phrases not separated this way seem just as disjointed. Discussing the poems written by Niedecker in the thirties, Penberthy notes Niedecker's "interest in words skimmed off the top of a hubbub, meaning made by an eavesdropper out of barely audible conversation, or words and meanings to the hearing impaired, such as her mother" (*Correspondence*, 30). This is certainly relevant to many of the surrealist poems of this early period but poems like "Regards to Mr. Glover", while not overtly surrealist, show traces of such influence which continued to surface in Niedecker's work to the end. In any case, despite its different approach (partly because of it), this poem gives just as accurate and vital an impression of folk speech as "The museum man!".

Niedecker also inserts snippets of speech into other poems, often to make a humourous point or punchline, as in "A student" (*Life*, 54), where she was obviously amused by the word "crane" pronounced "crayon", or "Two old men" (*Life*, 62); here one critic comments that "the friend's reply ["You spit/ I don't spit"] bespeaks an entire world view" (Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 72). However, they can provide other effects: "Old mother turns blue and from us" (*Life*, 47) uses the last words of Daisy Niedecker and a few phrases of Niedecker's own to present a bleak picture of the dying matriarch,

obsessive and powerful to the last. The few insertions, such as the first line, are kept simple to match the speech register. They provide the context and their very simplicity serves to emphasize the horror of the situation. The single word "blue" is horribly graphic; the mother's "turning from" her family demonstrates her movement towards death and away from life, perhaps her choice of this, as well as restless movement on her death bed; "Death from the heart" implies pain and grief as well as the cause of death, while "a thimble in the purse" continues the somewhat incongruous insistence on the domestic. As Clausen suggests ("Niedecker," 11) this poem has some similarity with Carlos Williams' "The Last Words of my English Grandmother" which also uses speech and the observations of someone who is present, ending: "Well, I'm tired/ of them and rolled her head away" (*Selected*, 127).

Thus part of Niedecker's identity, and of her identity *as a poet* lies with the folk and folk idiom, and although, as DuPlessis points out, this choice of folk forms may be one reason for Niedecker being "culturally coded as minor" by critics (97), she herself felt it to be a strength. The folk strand is without doubt an important part of Niedecker's original and individual style, and Penberthy goes so far as to claim that "the folk poems alone are the result of modernist experiment that puts her in the company of literary adventurers such as Mina Loy and Jane Bowles" (*Correspondence*, 4).

Niedecker spent all but a few years of her life in the same place, and we can see from her correspondence that she had great affection for her home: "To the English, Wisconsin places are all humped together – the Lake Superior country (to me high, hard, rough, rocks etc.) is another world from the lowland, the soft willowy, blackbird singy! of ours on the Rock River" (Letter to Corman, 10 June 1969, *Between*, 196). She frequently includes in her letters detailed descriptions of how things are "out home": "the beautiful barn swallows darting from river to house, lettuce up, red tulips spindly in the wind, fuzzy white things from willows floating about, grass grass grass to mow into eternity" (Letter to Corman, 28 May 1969, *Between*, 194). The reason place is of paramount importance to Niedecker's poetry is that it was of such importance to her. Her identity and development were shaped by and linked to her home place: "Where I am and who I am . . . everything else is so silly" (Letter to Zukofsky, 30 Nov. 1947,

Correspondence, 144). Niedecker also remarked to her friend Gail Roub, "Early in life I looked back of our buildings to the lake and said, 'I am what I am because of all this – I am what is around me – these woods have made me' " (quoted in Roub, 41). She once tried to articulate the depth of this attachment to her home in a letter to Zukofsky and found it all but impossible to convey:

> Unless you've become so much a part of your natural surroundings that you can't imagine what it would be like to live elsewhere, feel it as a living centre and source – consciousness and memory awakening at the mere sight of it – you don't know what I mean. Even people who live there don't know – and don't care if they have to move. But I'll have to take it with me in my mind when I go if I expect to survive. (Letter to Zukofsky, 26 Apr. 1957, Austin)[3]

Niedecker was sensitive to similar attachments in others, and felt an affinity with other writers involved with a specific place. Writing to Roub she mentions Willa Cather and prairies, commenting, "she with dust and I with water" (Letter to Roub, 9 May, 1967, quoted in Walsh, 32), while to Zukofsky she remarks, "The Brontës had their moors, I have my marshes!" (Letter to Zukofsky, May 1947, *Correspondence*, 146)[4]. It may be significant that these writers are also female, especially in view of the fact that male poets similarly involved with place did not suffer the misrepresentation and patronizing comments that Niedecker did (I will look further at Niedecker's relation to other women writers in chapter 5).

Along similar lines, Walsh suggests that Niedecker's choice of Thomas Jefferson as the subject of her late poem sequence may have been partly affected by Jefferson's love of his home. Niedecker deals with Jefferson's return after retirement to his estate, Monticello, in several parts of the sequence (XI, XII, XV, XVI, XVIII, XIX): "It is tempting," comments Walsh, "to read LN's own thoughts about her last years when they returned to Black Hawk Island into these quotes from Jefferson. Each has returned to a beloved place" (37). Certainly it was with great relief that Niedecker moved back to Black Hawk Island on a permanent basis; while living with Al Millen in Milwaukee she had travelled back to her cabin by the river at weekends whenever she could, and obviously missed being away. "Al and I retire," she wrote in anticipation, "he from work and I from Milwaukee hovels, next year by Nov." (Letter to Williams, 7 Dec. 1968, Jargon). Her distaste at living in town is apparent by her use of the word "hovel" –

clearly their apartment compared unfavourably in her eyes with her Black Hawk Island cabin, which would seem to many little more than a hovel itself.

Home was a source for poetry in several ways. It provided a suitable environment for reading, writing or working on poems – Walsh describes it as "the setting most conducive to [Niedecker's] creative life" (33). In times of disappointment Niedecker would turn to her home place for comfort and the strength to continue: "I suppose I won't hear from Stuart Montgomery," she wrote to Williams at a time when she hoped Montgomery might publish her work, "I think I'll go home to the marsh and pull the water over me" (Letter to Williams, 15 Mar. 1968, Jargon). And, of course, her surroundings provided a constant source for observations which might evolve into poems.

Of course, one of the main physical features of Niedecker's home place was the river, and water imagery is prominent in her poetry – the subtitle of "Paean to Place" (*Life*, 14) is "*And the place/ was water*" – and the water motif is one of the most obvious and striking features of this poem sequence. (In fact, the word "water" appears fourteen times, "flood" six times and other water words – pond, lake, river, sea, etc. – twelve times; there are also many watery verbs such as "sculled", "seined", "floated", "anchored" and various water craft are mentioned, "boat", "skiff" and "barges"). Of course, this motif is not confined to "Paean to Place" but it seems to be connected frequently with Niedecker's family and appears in most of the other poems about her parents, demonstrating the strength of the relationship in Niedecker's mind between her family and the home place. It may also be due in part to each parent's perception of water and the river, perceptions which must surely have influenced their child. Daisy Niedecker's view seems to be pessimistic or disparaging – "I've wasted my whole life in water" ("Well, spring overflows the land" *Life*, 33), whereas Henry Niedecker feels more kindly to water (he made part of his living from fishing), perhaps even in the end preferring it to land.

"Sit on the land even when it turns to water," Niedecker wrote (Letter to Zukofsky, 14 Jul. 1938, *Correspondence*, 124). Despite the cost of recurring flooding – "water endows us/ with buckled floors" ("Paean to Place") – and the pressure it put on

local inhabitants – Niedecker described how she once visited her parent's grave and told them, "I went thru a major flood but still like Black Hawk Island tho not quite so well as I used to" (Letter to Zukofsky, 30 Oct. 1960, *Correspondence*, 269) – Niedecker in the end preferred to stay in her watery home place. Indeed she rejected Charles Tomlinson's description of her home area as "that region of dangerous waters" (7): "He was thinking of flooding, I suppose, but considering what flooding does to places on the Mississippi, I don't call ours dangerous" (Letter to Corman, 10 Jun. 1969, *Between*, 196) – here Niedecker shows her typically wide perspective.

However, Niedecker at times seemed to doubt her decision to stay at home within a severely circumscribed locale. Throughout her life she tried to make up for the travelling she didn't do by, as one critic puts it, "connecting to other poets and to a large expanse of geography and history through her correspondence, reading and imagination" (Breslin, 142). The importance of this is made clear in a letter written to Zukofsky from home while he was travelling: "So while you're journeying over there I've been to Madison again, picked up Robert Payne's White Pony, trans. of Chinese poetry, and a beautiful little book of Gerard Manley Hopkins, another of Heine – so I get around – China, England, Germany (Paris?)" (Letter to Zukofsky, 26 June, 1957, *Correspondence*, 236). A few years later she admitted that perhaps she was missing out: "You know I shun travel but it's bound to give one something, maybe much more than if you stayed at home in a chair and got it in magazines or books. Just because the body went along?" (Letter to Zukofsky, 31 Dec. 1961, *Correspondence*, 295). And certainly she realized that travel could add something to poetry, as well as to one's own personal experience, possibly because of her association with Jonathan Williams, who travelled widely and used this for his work. Niedecker wrote to him in 1969, "Sometimes I feel so without access – your traveling about must get a bit tiresome but lord it opens up so much to you" (Letter to Williams, 2 Jul. 1969, Jargon).

The dating of this letter is rather odd, since Niedecker's second marriage to Al Millen in 1963 widened her horizons considerably, and the two took frequent motoring trips, visiting places near and far – the Mississippi River, Minnesota, North Dakota, the Lake Superior area, and the Ridges Sanctuary in Door County, Wisconsin. During the

period of her relationship with Harold Hein, Niedecker travelled with Hein in Wisconsin state and to Chicago but although this did inspire some poems ("The men leave the car", "Come In" and the short "Florida" sequence – Hein travelled to Florida in 1961) no poetic projects were sparked off to compare with "Lake Superior" or "Wintergreen Ridge". It is doubtful how much of the scenery of these trips with Al Niedecker actually took in. As well as the problem of her poor eyesight, Niedecker admitted that she was usually too busy taking notes to look out of the car window at points of interest, a fact she pokes wry fun at in the last part of the "Lake Superior" sequence (*Life*, 109).

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

This expansion of her physical horizons signalled a turning point in Niedecker's writing. "These trips," states Faranda, "moved her into . . . a new relation to her poetry and a less circumscribed field of particulars" ("Composing," 349). Indeed, despite the often uncomfortable nature of this marriage and the undeniable difficulties it caused for Niedecker, several people have suggested that one of the reasons Niedecker entered into it may have been that Al's car offered her a means of "access" to what she had always until then been denied. Although this new phase in her life, and in her poetry, took her away from her home and led her to concentrate intensely on things geographically outwith her locale, her focus on the particulars of place remains clear in the long poems "Lake Superior" and "Wintergreen Ridge".

I have tried in this chapter to give some new insights into place and locale in Niedecker's poetry and poetics and to emphasize two things: firstly, the importance of Niedecker's identity as a folk poet, and secondly that Niedecker's involvement with place and folk idiom does not place her outside poetic traditions. Rather she continues and develops the American tradition from Whitman through Carlos Williams. Of course, it is important that we as readers and critics do not ourselves see the provincial and local as inevitably minor and marginal. Provincial writing of any kind presents important challenges to the urban centralization of literature, and by defining all else as marginal

and unimportant, urban centralization is itself narrow in focus. A true literature of America, or any country, must take in all the experiences of all its people, whether they live in central areas or not. However, the way these "provinicial" aspects of Niedecker's work have been treated also points to a gender divide in criticism and reception, since male poets generally receive their due for innovative and interesting use of place and locale, whereas it seems to be one feature which keeps Niedecker marginalized. As Penberthy points out, Niedecker's folk poems have been dismissed, even perhaps disparaged by critics, despite the fact that they demonstrate her originality, experimentation and language work. Again, this shows how commentators persistently present Niedecker as insignificant, provincial and minor, and refuse to acknowledge the cutting edge of her work, whether it involves place and locale or, as in the next chapter, nature and environment.

II. "Light and silence": Niedecker's critical reception.

3. NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT: "every living thing".

Niedecker has often been classed as a "nature poet" and a frequently recurring subject in Niedecker criticism is her treatment of nature and environment. This is problematic in that definitions of "nature" and "nature poetry" can lead to a negative bias and to classification as "minor". For example, when Bertholf's edition of Niedecker's collected works, *From This Condensery*, was published in 1985, one reviewer praised it saying: "Among the realizations made possible by the Jargon edition is that Niedecker wrote more than dried wildflowers, or Wisconsin marsh stalks, or haiku pebbles to drop in Consciousness Pond" (Butterick, 228). This implies, of course, that Niedecker's haiku-like poems dealing with the natural world are unimportant or insignificant; it also shows clearly the way editors and commentators have misrepresented Niedecker's poetry, highlighting this type of work rather than, for instance, more politically charged poems. As with place, it seems that while critics insist upon the importance and prevalence of "nature" in Niedecker's work, they have neither looked closely at their own definitions of nature, nor at Niedecker's actual treatment of it and how this might fit in with other poetic traditions, American or otherwise. So that once again, Niedecker becomes defined as "minor" by a loose classification which, when explored more closely turns out to be more complex and more important to the formation of her ideas and poetics than readers may first have imagined.

We have seen in previous chapters that countless ill-informed articles and reviews have perpetuated and elaborated a false image of Niedecker "as a naive country 'savant' " (Sturgeon, 12), and that this image is now so firmly established that it has superseded the reality and blinkered our view of Niedecker and her work. Obviously, one can only continue to believe in this mythic identity if one distorts the facts. "I have more trees for friends than people," is an oft-quoted remark of Niedecker's that has been used to support the image of her as a nature-lover from a country backwater. The phrase comes in a letter to Corman, and in context it is far from naive or sentimental – as some commentators seem to take it. "I've never met him and I'll probably never feel he's my

'friend' as you say, tho we live within what – four miles of each other," wrote Niedecker of Morgan Gibson, "Just someone who wrote me a couple of years ago as to where he could get 'My Friend Tree.' See, I have more trees for friends than people" (Letter to Corman, 12 Jun. 1965, *Between*, 77).

Caddel outlines several of the problems that arise from the categorization of Niedecker as a "nature poet". First, he suggests that "we need perhaps to distinguish between 'nature poetry' as it's been understood up to the romantic era, from 'environmental poetry' such as our age demands" ("Consider"). By the end of her life, Niedecker had developed firmly held beliefs about environmental and ecological issues based on her own observations and on her reading of and about other naturalists, such as Darwin, Fabré, and more locally Thure Kumlein[1]. In this chapter I shall give at least some idea of the development from the early haiku-like poems which are admittedly more descriptive in type, to the long poems and sequences of the late sixties where Niedecker articulated her philosophy of environment. As Caddel points out, while readers may be discouraged by the idea of "nature poetry", growing interest in environmental issues over previous decades, now well-established as part of our nineties culture, means that Niedecker is not only relevant to today's reader, but seems to have been somewhat ahead of her time in tackling these issues.

Similarly, the vague link between "nature poetry" and the myth of a vanished "golden age" of rural dwelling harmony (part of the inheritance from Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Clare, who wrote during a time of agrarian reforms and industrialization) does much to influence our idea of it as irrelevant, perhaps even escapist. Again Caddel is aware of this, explaining how "some early approaches to [Niedecker's] work dealt with her natural surroundings as if her involvement with them was somehow a retreat, an act of escape from a 'real world', " but going on to state that "nothing could be further from the truth" ("Consider"). In fact, as I will show later in this chapter, Niedecker's situation is not so far from this as Caddel would have us believe, but for her the real world was that which surrounded her, natural as well as human, and it is on this that she focuses and from this that she takes many examples and descriptions. Once again, Caddel points out: "while many other apostles of 'nature poetry' do so from

a mystical, transcendental aesthetic, Niedecker is able to root hers in particulars – an immediate, local reality, a fusion of past and personal" ("Consider"). It is partly because of this that poems of Niedecker's involving her natural surroundings do not seem in any way removed from "real life" – they are observed with convincing closeness and intimacy. As with locale, nature and its workings were part of Niedecker's life and her apprehension of the world and so they were recorded in her poetry.

Because of the confusion arising from the use of the term "nature" I will try to avoid it. In general I will speak of Niedecker's descriptions of and involvement with "the natural world", "nature's cycles", or "nature's workings", her "natural surroundings" or her "natural environment". When discussing Niedecker's ideas about the connections between all life (animal, vegetable and mineral), I will use the terms "evolution" or "ecology". It is interesting to note that again a favourite poem for critical discussion is "Lake Superior" and certainly one can see why – it lays out many of Niedecker's ideas about the workings of nature for the first time (or the first time in this form) – but I would prefer to look instead at poems which have received less critical limelight, such as "Wintergreen Ridge" which, although highly praised by critics, has not often been discussed in detail or with an eye to the deeper implications of Niedecker's environmentalist stance. I will also look at the group of poems entitled "Traces of Living Things" (kept together as a group after Stuart Montgomery wrote to Niedecker that on reading them he felt a "strange feeling of sequence": this remark was included as a subtitle when the poems were published by Montgomery in the collection *My Life By Water*). The "Traces" group is interesting in that it contains many of the same ideas as "Lake Superior" though here the ideas are presented slightly differently. They are looked at from other angles, some of the emphases and foci are shifted, some of the examples are changed: in this way it makes revealing reading in conjunction with the other, better-known poem sequence.

As I have suggested, Niedecker began writing about the environment because it was just that: environment = surroundings, from the French. In her role as observer and recorder, Niedecker included the natural processes and events around her as well as the human goings-on, since natural things were an important part of her home place. "I spent

my childhood outdoors," she recalled, "red-winged blackbirds, willows, maples, boats, fishing (the smell of tarred nets), twittering and squawking noises from the marsh" (Letter to Cox, 10 Dec. 1966, "Extracts," 36), and from early in this childhood Niedecker was interested in observing and studying local flora and fauna: "By the time she was in fifth and sixth grades, she was bringing bird books to school, spending recess time and walking time identifying birds and learning their songs and habits" (Knox, 10). Niedecker described one of her first poems, "Reminiscence" printed in her high school year book in 1921, as "an ode to Lake Koshkonong" (quoted in Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 108) and throughout her writing life she continued to include the natural world in her poetry.

Perhaps, as George F. Butterick's comment above implies, the better-known Niedecker poems on the natural world are the very short, haiku-like poems. As well as the group "In Exchange For Haiku", there are several other poems of this type up to and around the fifties. Niedecker admired Japanese and Chinese poetry and spoke highly of Pound's work in this area – "The Japanese should go to Pound for Jap. poetry!! (The translators should)" (Letter to Zukofsky, Dec. 1960, Austin). Haiku had a place in Niedecker's "immortal cupboard" of favourite books (Letter to Corman, 18 Feb. 1962, *Between*, 33) and her love for this kind of poetry provided a link with Corman and probably influenced her admiration of his work. One haiku critic speaks of "the Japanese sensitivity for the small things of Nature generally neglected by people of the West, and the fact that these insignificant and ignoble creatures are in intimate relationships with the grand totality of the cosmic scheme" (Suzuki, 238), and as I will show this certainly relates to Niedecker and her way of writing about the natural world. Niedecker's minimalist tendency may also have attracted her to this form: her powers of observation and condensation could both be put to good use in this type of writing. However, as I will show when looking at Niedecker's condensation in chapter 6, such short poems are not just pure observation and description but can resonate with association and word play.

Penberthy suggests that after Niedecker's intense involvement with the Zukofsky family during the period when she was working on the "For Paul" groups, "haiku offered

her fresh air, a fresh start" (*Correspondence*, 75). As well as moving from personal and intimate human concerns to a more objective and distanced observation of the natural world, "haiku's bias towards nature allowed [Niedecker] to affirm her identification with home" after this long period of looking to New York and the Zukofskys for inspiration (Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 75). Louis Zukofsky's waning enthusiasm for the "For Paul" project may also have been a factor in this shift, and it is noticeable that in her correspondence with Jonathan Williams, Niedecker first suggests the "For Paul" poems as a possible collection, but later mentions her ongoing work with haiku-like poetry as more suitable for publication[2].

Yet it seems that the constraints imposed by this type of writing became too much for Niedecker to be entirely comfortable with it, and after experimenting for a while she eventually moved towards more open, expressive and finally much longer and more discursive forms. Niedecker often remarked on the beauty of haiku, even its completeness – "the world is in this Corman and Oriental-like poetry" (Letter to Zukofsky, 15 Jan. 1961, *Correspondence,* 274) – but at the same time her love of speech and the idiosyncratic voice biased her to some extent against the unemotional quality of such verse. "I'm conscious of so much more," she commented (Letter to Zukofsky, 15 Jan. 1961, *Correspondence*, 274), and she was aware that this type of poetry could be clichéd and frozen, lacking vitality: "a sameness ad infinitum. The cherry blossoms and ocean-waves and autumn forever and forever" (Letter to Zukofsky, Dec. 1960, Austin).

Late in her writing life, as I have already mentioned, Niedecker was reaching for a more "reflective" mode of writing (quoted in Roub, 41) that could express her complex ideas about the environment and our human condition, allowing the freedom to circle around ideas and open up possibilities. "Rather surprisingly in the light of Niedecker's Objectivist beginnings," writes one commentator, "this poetry is explicitly philosophical" (Clausen, "Niedecker," 11). I will discuss this change of form in chapter 6, and it is sufficient to say here that the gradual drift away from short, tight forms may have influenced Niedecker's ultimate rejection of the haiku model for poetry, though she continued to adapt it for occasional use throughout her writing life. For example, in her final collection the first three "Poems at the Porthole" (*Harpsichord*, 29) use a haiku-like

five-line form but their content is not that of the traditional haiku. However, it is true that the short haiku-like poems are closer to conceptions of "nature poetry" than any other of Niedecker's work on nature and environment.

This is not to say that Niedecker was not influenced by more traditional "nature poetry", that is the Romantic style. As we have seen in chapter 2, Niedecker admired poets outwith the English mainstream tradition, such as Robert Burns, and Caddel has compared the work of Niedecker and John Clare: both of these poets are sometimes described as Romantics, and both wrote about their natural surroundings, yet both were outside the tradition by virtue of their class, and their reluctance to relinquish their "provinciality" and roots in folk traditions. In her correspondence, Niedecker also mentions Wordsworth, and from the point of view of locale this is perhaps not surprising, since Wordsworth was very much involved with the Lake District, where he made his home. Niedecker wrote to Zukofsky after receiving a postcard from him: "Yes, imagine if I'd had that postcard picture of Rydal Water from Wordsworth's Field when I was 18, rowing a boat or walking the woods and reading him – o my!" (Letter to Zukofsky, 2 Sep. 1957, *Correspondence*, 238). However, later she wrote to Corman about this same reading of Wordsworth, remarking: "When I was 18 I bought a Wordsworth and took the book with me down here toward evening. I didn't quite know, yet I think I was vaguely aware that the poetry current (1921) was beginning to change" (Letter to Corman, 12 Dec. 1964, *Between*, 49) and she implies a lack of enthusiasm for Wordsworth's poetry in another letter: "I have a note for myself here – read Wordsworth's Prelude. Suzz!" (Letter to Zukofsky, 7 Jul. 1961, *Correspondence*, 285).

In a more American tradition, one of Niedecker's favourite prose works was Thoreau's *Walden*, which had a place in Niedecker's "immortal cupboard" (Letter to Corman, 18 Feb. 1962, *Between*, 33) and is also mentioned in a letter to Zukofsky: "I placed three books together that mean most to me – Marcus Aurelius, Thoreau's Walden and Japanese Haiku . . ." (Letter to Zukofsky, 1 Jun. 1958, *Correspondence*, 246). As regards poetry, Emily Dickinson, a "hidden" influence on Niedecker, as I will show in the next chapter, included "nature" in her work, though as one critic comments, "while for Dickinson nature is a secondary theme to her self, the reverse is true of Lorine

Niedecker" (Davies, 129). Like Dickinson, and other women poets such as Christina Rossetti and H. D., Niedecker used "nature" (descriptions of natural objects or the natural world) as a figure for sexuality, or for the female body – I will look at this more closely in chapter 5. More modern poets influencing Niedecker, such as Carlos Williams and Zukofsky also wrote a number of poems on what we might call "nature" (for instance, Carlos Williams' "The Locust Tree in Flower" and Zukofsky's "All of December Toward New Year's") though both experienced urban rather than rural living and were not so well placed to observe the natural world as Niedecker. Certainly, during the fifties period, Niedecker found the oriental style of poetry better suited to her needs and temperament.

Objectivism was concerned with describing observed objects ("thinking with the things as they exist" Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 12), while haiku calls for "perfect identification between subject and object, seer and seen" (Suzuki, 246) and Niedecker too wanted to express both sides of such perception. Several commentators have tried to articulate this aspect of Niedecker's work: one describes it as "a mediation between herself and speechlessness of what surrounds her" (O'Brien, 43), while another remarks that, "her favoured mode of understanding . . . is observation, as though the act of contemplation thoroughly wedded one with the physical universe" (Heller, "Musical," 25). Niedecker herself wrote to Zukofsky, "I wonder if we can dare cross the gap someday – what we feel, see, inside us and outside us melted together absolutely" (Letter to Zukofsky, 24 Dec. 1962, *Correspondence*, 327). A good example of this kind of process at work is the poem "Mergansers/ fans" (*Life*, 116) from the "Traces of Living Things" group, where, as Caddel points out, "observed particulars meet interior thoughts in a circle" ("Common," 44).

Mergansers
    fans
        on their heads

Thoughts on things
    fold unfold
        above the river beds

Both "fans" and "thoughts" open and close, and as the ducks ride the river, so the poet's thoughts "fold unfold" on the surface of her mind, below which the currents of conscious and unconscious flow. (There is a further parallel with "Paean to Place" *Life*, 20, where "red Mars" "rides the sloughs and sluices" of the poet's mind).

The ideas articulated in "Lake Superior", "Traces" and "Wintergreen Ridge" – that all life, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, is connected by the cycles and processes of the earth and the seasons – are foreshadowed in Niedecker's work from the beginning, though this is perhaps not as noticeable as the strain of haiku-like poems. In the early poem, "She was a mourner too" (*Collected*, 141) we find the lines: "No, restore/ my matter, never free from motion,/ to the soil's roar"; while "Along the river" (*Life*, 23) describes nature's cycles of death and rebirth ("the dead/ who gave me life"); and other poems of the late sixties like "Consider" (*Harpsichord*, 25) establish similar connections ("when an old boat rots ashore/ itself once living plant/ it sprouts"). As early as 1945, Niedecker was trying to formulate, both for herself and in her poetry, the ideas prevalent in her late longer works. After some recent reading that she had clearly found illuminating, she wrote to Celia Zukofsky:

> I really begin to believe there is another life for us after we die, one not like ours, at least not for a long, long time. Elements for awhile before we again become, if we ever do, another mass. Time is nuttn in the universe. The elephant may be on his way to becoming a worm, and vice versa, as a species, I mean. All of which I wanted to say in my poem but didn't quite . . . (Letter to Celia Zukofsky, 29 Aug. 1945, *Correspondence*, 134)

(It is not certain to which poem this refers but it may have been "Along the river" mentioned above. Penberthy [*Correspondence*, 135] believes it likely to have been "Look close" *Collected*, 171, though she does not say why).

Observation or clear vision plays a part in these poems too, for in her portrayal of the natural world Niedecker includes not only the appealing and beautiful, but also things that remind us nature can be "red in tooth and claw". Here again we see that Niedecker does not try to escape reality, she accepts the ugly or poisonous with the pretty and fruitful. For example, poems about flowers might be thought to encapsulate the sentimental side of "nature poetry" but although Niedecker often included flowers in her work, she had her own reasons for this. As one critic remarks, "Niedecker found in

flowers not only objects of beauty but structures of great strength and emotive force," and further, "the flowers she most favors are not showy or delicate, but such tenacious specimens as commonplace weeds and the insectivorous Drosera" (Kilroy, 119). A frequently mentioned flower in Niedecker's work is the water lily, and other water or marsh plants also occur, as well as several garden flowers, and – as Kilroy suggests – weeds[3]. One of the most memorable flowers in Niedecker is the "old sunflower" of "Wintergreen Ridge" (*Life*, 126):

you bowed

to no one
but Great Storm
of Equinox

Again, looking to other American poets, Carlos Williams has several poems describing flowers, (for instance, "The Crimson Cyclamen"), and Zukofsky composed a group of poems entitled *80 Flowers*, though this was composed between 1974 and 1978, after Niedecker's death. Penberthy notes that Niedecker often wrote to the city-dwelling Zukofsky about various plants and flowers (in the light of the discussion above, it is noticeable that *80 Flowers* includes weeds and less attractive plants) and in her editing of Niedecker's letters to Zukofsky, Penberthy indicates when plants and flowers described by Niedecker occur in *80 Flowers*. Certainly, many flowers Niedecker singled out in her own work appear in Zukofsky's project: chicory (see Niedecker's "Chicory flower on campus" *Life*, 91; and "Your erudition" *Pail*, 94); Queen Anne's Lace (see Niedecker's "Consider" *Harpsichord*, 25); and daisy – not perhaps included in any Niedecker poems, but "B. P." was used by both Niedecker and Zukofsky as a nickname for Daisy Niedecker (the Latin name for daisy is *Bellis Perennis,* which appears in the "Daisy" of *80 Flowers*).

Returning to the issue of a complete vision of the natural world, Penberthy writes that, "Evolution has an unrelenting forward momentum within which there is room for contradictory impulses; humankind and nature are cruel and compassionate; fragility outlives brute strength" (*Correspondence*, 92). Thus, as well as all-pervasive water which can be a power for good or ill, the range of Niedecker's work takes in a "Bird's

mating-fight" (*Life*, 71) and "the wild/ wet rat, muskrat/ grind[ing] his frogs and mice" ("Some float off on chocolate bars" *Life*, 89). Other poems slyly mock the tendency to romanticize "nature", like "Something in the water/ like a flower/ will devour" (*Life*, 82) and the following (*Collected*, 178):

> White
> among the green pads –
>   which
>   a dead fish
> or a lily?

In "Wintergreen Ridge", Niedecker insisted upon the "deadly" properties of the Drosera mentioned by James Kilroy, its secreted fluid which "digests cartilage/ and tooth enamel", "the better to eat you/ my dear" (*Life*, 121) and followed this up with descriptions of other plants using similar devices to catch live prey. Again Niedecker seemed to be aware of the reputation of "nature poetry", and immediately after these passages she remarked in connection with the Ridges Sanctuary: "Women saved/ a pretty thing: Truth" (*Life*, 121). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this "truth" also emerges in "Darwin", which includes poisonous spiders (II, *Harpsichord*, 42) and the "hideous black lava" of the Galapogas Islands, home to "a thousand turtle monsters" and "blood bright crabs", as well as more appealing "penguins" and "seals" (III, *Harpsichord*, 43-44). Niedecker once wrote, "For me when it comes to birds, animals and plants, I'd like the facts because the facts are wonderful in themselves" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Mar. 1958, *Correspondence*, 243). Certainly the truth about the natural world is not always pretty and Niedecker knew it.

By establishing the connections between all life, Niedecker is inevitably concerned with unity. Clausen remarks that, "Niedecker seeks the unity implied by unceasing change; she is interested in natural *process* [her italics]" ("Necessary," 3), that is, all life is connected by its common ancestry but new life or new development cannot be possible without change – "continuous life/ through change" ("Wintergreen Ridge" *Life,* 119). One of the consequences of this establishment of unity, for Niedecker and for her poetry, is that humankind is included in the natural whole. Of course, this is not a new idea and one critic states that the general tradition of Modernism promoted "a calm

acceptance of the human place in, and proper relation to, the totality of nature (Géfin, 137), rather than the notion that humankind is somehow above (separate from) the rest of the natural world by reason of our evolutionary primacy. As I have mentioned, Carlos Williams, the Objectivists and later poets such as Olson were concerned with the specifics of objects, places, and so on, and Laszlo Géfin describes them as looking for ways to "regain our physicality" (presumably our biological or physiological nature), and "to reestablish our true relation with 'space' and with the natural world" (136).

Niedecker's "I rose from marsh mud" (*Life*, 66) is important in this context. Her comments on the poem indicate that the first line has a double meaning: the speaker leaves her marshy home to attend the wedding, but she also evolved from algae-filled mud into a being that creates elaborate cultural ceremonies. Niedecker's preliminary notes for the poem begin with "the primordial slime" and she remarks, "planted willows in it, make my own beginning of creation"; other jottings include "mental cell division", "earliest organizer" and "all flesh is grass/ all blood + bones = grass". (These notes were sent to S. U. N. Y., Buffalo after Niedecker received a request for evidence of her poetic process from Eugene Magner, then director of the poetry collection). To Zukofsky, Niedecker relates: "Whole of history went thru my head, a big step from algae to CHURCH (for some people there can be no pro-creation without the church!), from cell division to the male sweating it out while the other collects International Sterling Silver" (Letter to Zukofsky, 22 June 1948, *Correspondence*, 151). Contrasting the negative view of organized religion presented in this poem, the "sweet green" of the first stanza – our original primal condition – seems much more attractive than the frigid artificiality ("diamond fronds") of our highly evolved state. Perhaps it is not going too far to suggest that one of the implications of "I rose" is that we have become over-evolved and are now stagnating, cut off from our source of life and change.

But however far they may have come, people are part of the natural world. Niedecker highlighted this part of Darwin's theory, quoting: "'I believe Man .../ in the same predicament/ with other animals'" ("Darwin" *Harpsichord*, 41), and indeed this belief may have been part of his attraction as a poetic subject. Humankind is still subject to the pull of nature's cycles and seasons, as "Dusk" (*Life*, 82) points out:

How slippery is man
          in spring
                    when the small fish
                              spawn

Niedecker told Zukofsky how she picked up this line from a conversation with one of her neighbours and exclaimed, "was I listening to Chaucer??" (Letter to Zukofsky, 25 Dec. 1957, *Correspondence*, 242).

Perhaps Niedecker's best known statement of the connections between all life is the first stanza of "Lake Superior", from which I have taken the epigraph for this chapter – "In every part of every living thing/ is stuff that once was rock" (*Life*, 105) – but this does not make explicit humankind's inclusion in natural unity, as does "Traces of Living Things". This "sequence" takes us from "the protozoic/ Vorticellae" ("Museum" *Life*, 110) to "J. F. Kennedy after/ the Bay of Pigs" (*Life*, 116) and property ownership (a cultural development unknown to indigenous people like the American Indian Black Hawk; see "Black Hawk held: In reason" *Life*, 24) and relates humankind not only to rock and minerals but to plants (trees and leaves), water (the sea) and other forms of life ("mud clam", "veery", "dragonfly"). The first poems in this group ("Museum", "Far reach", "TV", "We are what the seas" and "The eye/ of the leaf") establish these connections after the manner of "Lake Superior", and the fourth poem (*Life*, 111) is perhaps equal in importance to "In every part of every living thing":

We are what the seas
have made us

longingly immense

the very veery
on the fence

All life has been shaped by natural forces: "the seas/ have made us" in that the first mammals evolved from prehistoric creatures which left the sea to walk on land. Thus we, and the "veery" (a North American thrush) can "trace" ourselves back to those first creatures from the sea. "Immense" reflects the vastness of the prehistoric sea, as well as the huge variety of creatures which evolved from its first inhabitants, and the "long" of "longingly" could imply how long ago that first step was taken, the long line through

history and prehistory that connects us with the sea and its creatures. (Note that the stanza containing prehistoric sea and present veery are separated by this middle line). The "veery" evolved from the same sea-bred source as humankind, but has split from the line, developing differently so that there is now almost as big ("immense") a gap between the bird and the human speaker as between us and our prehistoric ancestors. Veery and human may have taken different evolutionary steps, but the thrush shares its territory with people, sitting on the poet's garden fence while she looks on – thrushes (and other birds) can often be seen perched with heads cocked as if arrested in thought. Further, although we have now developed "immense" brains and have the potential ("longing"?) to do huge things, we more often end up "sitting on the fence" and doing nothing, not getting involved. Perhaps this explains some of the poem's mystery, that evocative "longingly" – what do we long for? will we attain it? – which imparts a wistful, feeling note to a poem dealing with a massive and objective scientific theory.

Yet despite Niedecker's apparent acceptance of humankind as part of natural unity, she finds it difficult to embrace people and their artificial environment with the same enthusiasm as she does her other surroundings. Although this aspect of Niedecker's poetry gives rise to her environmentalism, that is, an emphasis on preservation and harmony with the natural world and its cycles, it is also a possible source of alienation for readers and critics who may feel Niedecker's criticism of modern urban life is too negative, or even regressive. On the one hand, a sympathetic reader can understand how this might have come about – "the everyday workings of nature usually seemed much more vivid and real than the cultural and political matters that preoccupied educated folks back east" (Clausen, "Niedecker," 11) – but it is easy to view the situation as a binary opposition, like one commentator on "Wintergreen Ridge": "its themes include the clash of rural with urban values and man's versus nature's history" (Butterick, 233).

Certainly Niedecker was very much aware of her own environment, and she was obviously disappointed, even appalled, when others proved that they were not equally considerate. A well-known example of this stance occurs in her "Lake Superior" sequence. The poem "Wild Pigeon" (*Life*, 108) is about the extinction of the passenger pigeon and it uses strong language to evoke an emotional response in the reader – the

pigeon is described in terms of semi-precious stones and rich colours ("cobalt and carnelian") while "man" violently "mashes" it to death. Other poems, early and late, portray humankind's disrespect for the natural world and its other inhabitants, and also compare urban environments unfavourably with rural areas. "My mother saw the green tree toad" (*Life*, 67) implies the decline of another species (the toad is "the first one" the mother has seen "since she was young") due to the interference of people (by the destruction of its natural habitat?), and ends on a negative note, "it changed to brown/ and town changed us too". The "In Exchange for Haiku" poem, "People, people" (*Life*, 78) presents a similarly negative picture of our interaction with the natural environment – "Ten dead duck's feathers/ on beer can litter" – though the cycle of the seasons is seen to help somewhat – "Winter/ will change all that". Two much later poems set out other examples. Part 4 of the "Florida" sequence (*Collected*, 260) demonstrates actual exploitation of other species by humankind for reasons of "vanity"; "the pink flamingo/ gone" replaced by "Flocks/ of headkerchiefs" (in a letter Niedecker wrote, "flamingo is no longer seen north of Key West, killed for its plumes, the vanity of women", Letter to Zukofsky, 18 Feb. 1962, *Correspondence*, 302). "City Talk" II (*Collected*, 261), apparently prompted by "flower beds/ on the superhighways", reflects on how humans have used their large brains ("the facilities/ the information/ from the colleges") to manipulate the cycles of nature – "they force it/ and all that garbage".

Of course, "Wintergreen Ridge" (*Life*, 118) provides a positive example, describing a visit to the Ridges Sanctuary where many species of rare plants flourish and are protected. Although some people may be "gawks/ lusting/ after wild orchids" others have more consideration for their environment.

Women
of good wild stock

stood solid
before machines
They stopped bulldozers

cold
We want it for all time
they said

and here it is

Thus "evolution's wild ones" are "*saved*". Yet, as Butterick has pointed out, towards the end of the poem the urban is contrasted unfavourably with the rural or natural. While still in the sanctuary, the poet remarks, "I see no space rocket/ launched here/ no mind-changing/ acids eaten" but driving back into town the environment changes, and so do other things. Towns and cities are "so far out of flowers" that dismemberment ("Human parts/ found wrapped in newspaper") and suicide ("second shift steamfitter/ . . ./ dived to concrete/ from loading dock") are common news, and war " 'cannot be stopped' ". It is interesting that though these horrors are associated with an urban environment in this poem, they are not specifically or necessarily urban problems (Niedecker once wrote to Zukofsky about a suicide in her own small town)[4], rather they are a product of modern society as a whole.

Thus, to say that Niedecker's involvement with her natural environment was escapism seems partly true. At one time, referring to her current writing project, she expressed her disillusionment with humankind to Zukofsky: "Have decided I must do something folky for the next section of For Paul. Only it's getting so you go almost anywhere for it but to the people – in their barbarity – no wonder I keep going to the birds and the animals" (Letter to Zukofsky, 5 Feb. 1950, Austin). Incidentally this also expresses some of Niedecker's dissatisfaction with prevalent ideas of what constitutes "primitive" people. I have already mentioned her poem about Black Hawk, the Indian chief who believed that "land cannot be sold"; American Indians are mentioned in other places in Niedecker's work, again in connection with property swindling in "Pioneers" ("Winnebagoes knew nothing/ of government purchases of their land/ agency men got chiefs drunk/ and let them stand" *Life*, 34) and in direct contrast with the European settlers in "Lake Superior" (*Life*, 108). (The bias of this passage has been disputed by critics though in the other poems mentioned Niedecker's sympathies seem to lie firmly with the Indians).

Perhaps Niedecker felt that if she turned to people, she might lose contact with her natural surroundings, become as oblivious to them as others are, thus losing one of her most precious sources. She seemed in one letter to Zukofsky to express a feeling that

involvement with people might hold her back from her natural environment – "the things of nature are good if people will let me have them" (Letter to Zukofsky, 19 Mar. 1956, Austin)[5] – and this can also be applied to the reception of her environmental and ecological poetry. However this may be, Niedecker's belief in the connections between all life and the unity of the natural world can be as strong as if not stronger than her disapproval of humankind's disregard for the world in which we live.

"One is led to acknowledge," writes one critic, "that man's link to all of nature is as intimate as a family bond" (Kilroy, 130) and Niedecker demonstrates this literally in poems like "My friend tree" and "Along the river" ("our relative the air/ our rich friend/ silt"), as well as more subtly in the many, many poems where she describes people as birds, plants, or even minerals. This is given special point in "Don't shoot the rail" (*Life*, 28) where the speaker exhorts her hearer not to shoot as it would disturb grandfather who is dropping off to sleep; the grandfather is then described as a bird ("his long-billed pipe/ on his red-brown vest"). "Such is the indomitablility of life," writes one critic, "that [Niedecker] perceives it surviving even man's destructive folly" (Walsh, 23). And indeed in "Wintergreen Ridge" Niedecker seeems to articulate just such a philosophy:

Unaffected

by man
thin to nothing lichens
grind with their acid

granite to sand
These may survive
the grand blow-up –

the bomb

Perhaps because Niedecker's attitudes to her natural environment, humankind's place in the natural world, and environmental and ecological concerns are problematic, and perhaps also because critical notions of "nature" and "nature poetry" are confused or variable, critics have more often chosen to view both "nature" and Niedecker's work in simplistic terms. Once again, critics are more than willing to leave the "mythical image" of Niedecker unchallenged and unquestioned, and they carry on describing her as a "nature poet" without explaining their categorization or exploring more fully Niedecker's

treatment of nature and environment (for instance, by the simple expedient of choosing works other than "Lake Superior" as examples). In order to properly understand Niedecker's ideas and motivations, especially towards the end of her life, we must come to terms with her complex appreciation of environment and ecology in the local specifics of place, and in a much larger sense.

As I have shown, in some ways Niedecker did use the natural world as an escape from modern, urban, mechanized life, and by her adaptation of haiku she certainly took on at least one traditional form of what we might call "nature poetry" (though not a form traditional for poetry in English). Again, we have seen that other poets at the same time as Niedecker were also writing poems which described the particulars of natural objects, yet this is generally overlooked in Niedecker criticism. It is true that the natural world, and natural history play a greater part in Niedecker's work than in other poets but I have suggested already that this may be owing to her choice of a more rural home and locale. However, I hope I have also demonstrated that the depth and breadth of Niedecker's thinking about the natural world and all its processes had important and far-reaching consequences for the development of her poetic work, as well as her personal philosophy.

II. "Light and silence": Niedecker's critical reception.

4. GLOBAL POLITICS: "world disillusionment".

It is obvious from the two preceding chapters that both locale and environment must be prominent factors in any discussion of Niedecker's poetry, but it would be doing Niedecker an injustice were we to ignore other subjects or themes in her work. Of course, this injustice has been done time and time again to Niedecker by critics who have set the later poems on place and environment in the spotlight, thus exiling others to the shadows where they are rarely noticed. In this chapter and the next I hope to retrieve for discussion at least some material from this outer darkness, beginning here with Niedecker's treatment of global and social politics, especially poverty and war.

Niedecker wrote as many, perhaps more, poems on these subjects as on place or environment, a fact which does not match up with the image of her as a "local", "nature" poet but there are several possible reasons why these poems have been neglected. Firstly, the greatest concentration of these poems on global or political subjects is to be found in the early "Mother Goose" and *New Goose*[1] collections and only a small proportion of these poems have been included in Niedecker editions (with the exception of *From This Condensery*). Also, the poems are generally short and can be easily dismissed as slight because of this, while nursery rhyme and folk influences are strong in this early work, which might lead readers and critics to believe these poems are simplistic or childish. Critics have preferred to spend time on the lengthier, late poems rather than bothering with early, short verses which do not have the same technical accomplishment and subtlety as more mature work.

It is also true that critics are reluctant to discuss literature from the point of view of subject matter: content – *what* is said – is seen to be less important than style – *how* it is said. And of course, some subjects are considered detrimental to the literary value of the work. Tompkins notes how literary criticism "tends to classify work that affects people's lives, or tries to, as merely sensational or propagandistic" (ix) and observes, "The fact that a work engages such issues, in this view, is an index not of its greatness, but of its limitation; the more directly it engages purely local and temporal concerns, the

less literary it will be" (186). I hope to show that Niedecker critics, and at times Niedecker herself, seem to agree with this view. Publishers and editors, too, are affected and again I will demonstrate that Niedecker's work suffered from what Olsen calls "publisher's censorship, refusing subject matter or treatment as 'not suitable' or 'no market for' " (9). All of these factors have meant that Niedecker's more politically charged work has all but vanished from, or remains unrecognisable as such in collections of her work.

Yet these poems deserve notice. Indeed they make interesting reading next to poems of different style and subject. Some critics have realized and welcomed this fact. "The early poems especially are a revelation," remarked one reviewer of *From This Condensery* (Butterick, 228), while Penberthy points out that, "Their political content – including their preoccupation with war – and their surrealism challenge the conventional notion that Niedecker's poetry is grounded in nature and place" ("Variant," 116). Incidentally, here is another reason why these poems have been ignored: critics are very reluctant to tackle or even admit Niedecker's surrealist influences, which are strong in the very early work.

However, poems on global or political subjects do not only occur among the early work (though even if this were the case, the sheer amount of "Mother Goose" to *New Goose* material surely merits discussion and investigation). Just as environmental and place themes come to full flower in later works like "Lake Superior", "Wintergreen Ridge", and "Paean to Place" but can be found throughout Niedecker's poetic career, so too the global and social strands reach from "Mother Goose" right through to *Harpsichord & Salt Fish*. In this chapter I will trace the development of poverty and war from "Mother Goose" and *New Goose* through most of the subsequent groups and collections. I will also demonstrate clearly that although, as we have seen, Niedecker preferred to stay on Black Hawk Island, valuing her natural surroundings and own home place, this does not mean she was unaware of the larger world around her: her concerns were not only local but national, international, global.

The poems from "Mother Goose" to *New Goose* were written during the U. S. depression and the period of economic slump across the West leading up to World War

II, and many of the poems include references to, or are more directly about poverty. Niedecker comes at this subject from several angles, looking at economic policies devised by the government; various facets of capitalism; poor employment and unemployment. One critic has said that in Niedecker's work, "The poet's voice possesses the reader; he is denied the balanced tone and refusal to judge that is, for example, Reznikoff's most obvious quality" (Heller, "Light," 49). Certainly, many of these poems are, as so often in Niedecker, "spoken" by a persona who utters grievances or makes statements but others are spoken by the poet as observer and recorder and these too leave us in little doubt as to where the poet's sympathies lie.

Niedecker herself knew poverty at first-hand: her father was a carp seiner who let out small fishing cabins for extra income but he was not careful with his money and the family were never more than breaking even financially. Niedecker had several low-paid jobs in her lifetime and went through periods of unemployment when she lived on social security[2]. I have mentioned in chapter 1 that Niedecker lived most of her life in cramped accommodation with only basic amenities but she never seemed to see this as particularly difficult. She chose extra expenditures carefully, and indeed had little space to keep many possessions. "Despite poverty," writes one commentator, "materialism never seems to have been a temptation to her" (Walsh, 3).

One poem on poverty which has been reproduced in collections is "Depression Years" (*Life*, 51), the title (rare in Niedecker) giving point as well as scale to the poem. "Depression Years" is short and fairly straightforward, which may be why no-one spends any time on it, though the same could not be said of the earlier, untitled poem "My coat threadbare" (*Life*, 24), also reproduced several times. Though it yields much to analysis it is slightly surrealist and may, on first and even after many readings, seem obscure or nonsense. In fact, the poem deals with several aspects of poverty that concern Niedecker. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the threadbare coat worn by the speaker, and one reading of the ambiguous "fashions mornings after" is that the poor always wear yesterday's fashions because they can seldom afford new clothes. Certainly the poor have few and inadequate clothes, as other Niedecker poems point out – "it must be fun/ to have boots for snow" ("O let's glee glow as we go" *Collected*, 134); "the family's shoes/

patched and worn" ("van Gogh" *Life*, 32) – and even when the clothes are no longer fit to be worn they are used for something else, as in "Hand Crocheted Rug" (*Collected*, 160). Niedecker knew personally, and obviously felt this hardship, for in the autobiographical poem "Paean to Place" she wrote, "Seven years the one/ dress/ for town once a week/ one for home" (*Life*, 17-18), and she economized by making her own clothes.

Of course, the poor may be always with us (the "Eternal Category"?) but the speaker here seems to be moving towards an even worse situation (over the hill, going downhill, down on one's luck) and the blame is laid at the government's door. Almost literally in this case with the reference to "Capital Hill": Washington's Capitol Building has been copied in many smaller forms in several U. S. states, including Wisconsin. The spelling of "Capital" implies finance and economics, and the capitalism Niedecker rejected (see "The government men said don't plant wheat" *Collected*, 149; "I doubt I'll get silk stockings out" *Collected*, 160; "Van Gogh could see" *Collected*, 178). "Eternal Category" could also recall economic jargon, as well as fine-sounding political phrases, for America, land of the free, land of promise, has become the "land of rigmarole". A dictionary definition of "rigmarole" has two senses, both applicable here: first, "any long complicated procedure" – perhaps the tedious and often absurd procedures for seeking financial assistance from the state; and secondly, "a set of incoherent or pointless statements, garbled nonsense" – either the speeches of politicians who promise recovery, or the recitation of financial reports. Similarly, the "laughter" might be that of falsely cheerful politicians, who never really suffer under a depression; alternatively it could be the laughter of poor people trying to put a good face on things. Either way, the laughter means nothing when we look past it to many more "mornings after" with no prospect of change for the better.

In the thirties many Americans, dissatisfied with way the government was driving their country, began to look around for alternatives. Many writers and artists identified themselves with socialism and communism (Pound, of course, mentor and monolith to many, went quite the other way, though Niedecker at least seems to have managed to keep separate her admiration for his poetry and her disapproval of his politics). George

Oppen, one of the Objectivists, gave up poetry in order to devote himself to political and social change and he and his wife were forced to move to Mexico to avoid the communist witchhunts of later years. Zukofksy compiled a *Worker's Anthology* and "*A*" 1-12 shows the political slant to his reading and writing at this time: Niedecker commented, "You will be called a red without the least understanding on their part. Are you prepared for that?" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Nov. 1957, *Correspondence*, 240). Of course, Niedecker herself was always worried about attracting publicity: "One's fear is people – going public" (Letter to Monroe, 12 Feb. 1934, quoted in *Correspondence*, 36), though at this time Zukofsky was reportedly supplying her "not only with literary magazines but with regular copies of the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*" (Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 37). In her library at home Niedecker had Lenin's *Materialism and Empiric Criticism*, a *Handbook of Marxism*, and, characteristically, an edition of the correspondence of Marx and Engels (*Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Correspondence, 1846-1895*) quotations from which were included by Zukofsky in "*A*"-9 (information about Niedecker's personal library can be found in Appendix 5 of Sturgeon's thesis).

This political bias shows in many Niedecker poems as general anti-capitalism and one critic describes the "Mother Goose" poems as specifically attacking "the New Deal politics of individual gain" (Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 38). "No retiring summer stroke" (*Collected*, 167) obviously derides "the pop play of tax, borrow or inflate" and recommends:

> . . . the radiant, tight energy
> boring from within
> communizing fear
> into strike,
> work.

Certainly Niedecker began on the side of "the working soul" ("O let's glee glow as we go" *Collected*, 134) but her attitude seems to have changed over the years, perhaps because of her struggles to keep her identity both as a part of her local community and as a poet, and probably more specifically because of the West's increasing disillusionment with Russia (a poem beginning "In Europe they grow a new bean" originally read "Russia" instead of "Europe"). In 1949 Niedecker wrote to Zukofsky, "You and I are

being squeezed between the expensive workman and the capitalist. Neither wants the type of thing we have to offer . . . I hope the worker wins but where does it get us now and a long time after the victory?" (Letter to Zukofsky, 9 Nov. 1949, *Correspondence*, 164) and she later referred to a time "when I was wasting myself on action for the working people" (Letter to Zukofsky, 25 Dec. 1957, *Correspondence*, 242). By 1962 she could comment, "Just heard a radio interview with Stephen Spender – why he joined the Communist Party 30 years ago but would not now. He's right!" (Letter to Zukofsky, 4 Feb. 1962, *Correspondence*, 299). However, though Niedecker's belief in the need for revolutionary change may have been shaken, she did not change her attitude to the materialism and consumerism that became so much a part of late twentieth century America.

DuPlessis sees Niedecker as "liv[ing] out her intense marginality to a dominant culture of materialism, bellicosity, bigness/ bestness, and fame" (97) and also describes how Niedecker "makes her poetry involve her critical discomfort" with such a culture. "I am sick with the Time's buying sickness," Niedecker wrote in one poem, "true value expands/ it warms" (*Collected*, 202). At times Niedecker felt that her poetry suffered because of these cultural pressures, explaining to Corman once when she sent him a poem, "I cd. do better if I weren't once again somewhat caught up in *things*" (Letter to Corman, 12 Dec. 1964, *Between*, 49). Niedecker led what many would consider a spartan lifestyle but she seemed to want to live this way and enjoyed it. She was generous in giving money to literary causes,[3] often sent money and gifts to Paul Zukofsky[4] and, in one of her first letters to Corman, indicates that she will be glad to help him out financially if he needs it (Letter to Corman, 7 Nov. 1960, *Between*, 25). Of course, this shows that money was important to Niedecker but its importance was as a means of survival, and of literary or poetic survival – Niedecker had a room of her own and her own income and seemed quite content with these limited means.

Indeed, she grudged making improvements to her home; no doubt they took up a relatively large amount of money and time, and as she had managed without them before, did not seem worth it. In 1962 Niedecker had plumbing installed in her cabin for the first time. "To my pressure pump" (*Life*, 90) is one of her better-known poems but in the light

of Niedecker's political beliefs it reads as a critique of materialism. "I've been free with less," the poem begins, "free" contrasting both "bound" in the second stanza, and "cost" in the third; the speaker feels tied down by this material gain, which has cost her in time, space and effort as well as money. Niedecker further contrasts the prosaic plumbing of "faucet shower/ heater" with her own poetic task, "I plumbed for principles", implying by the then-now distinction that this concession to material things has bound her to them, distracting her from her previous allegiance to poetry. Underlying Niedecker's account of this experience in a letter are dissatisfaction with the drive towards materialism and a sense that she has paid for something worthless, or not worth the trouble it has put her to: "I now have plumbing in my house and almost washed away by it. The hazards of convenience. I saved most of my living room by stanching the deluge with scatter rugs. Civilization is an immense ad: Go to hell and be happy" (Letter to Williams, 21 Oct. 1962, Jargon).

Anti-materialism is clearly central to Niedecker's thinking, and it surfaces near the end of "Paean to Place" (*Life*, 19-20) as part of the conclusion to this long sequence, and indeed to Niedecker's life as she reviews it in the poem.

O my floating life
Do not save love
        for things
            Throw *things*
to the flood

ruined
by the flood
        Leave the new unbought –
            all one in the end –
water

I possessed
the high word:
        The boy my friend
            played his violin
in the great hall

Thus Niedecker sets "love/ for things", which cannot last because material possessions do not last, against love for people, truly ours to keep, if only in our memory. Indeed, these memories are "washed of hardships" (in the next and final part of the sequence) and

"the persons" are what remain in the mind of the poet. Where earlier poems had satirical bite, the statement of Niedecker's anti-materialist views in this late poem is calm, mature and thoughtful, and perhaps more convincing for being so (still, none of the critics who discuss "Paean to Place" spend much or any time on it).

Readers and critics might find Niedecker's views on property less convincing because it can be difficult to see how she reconciled her anti-capitalist views with her ownership of property. Niedecker inherited the fishing cabins hired out by her father, without wanting either them or the responsibility they thrust upon her and, as with her "home improvements", she found they brought trouble in excess of any benefit to be gained. However, the fact that Niedecker owned property complicated her attitude to it, and again she allows her feelings on the subject to enter her poetry.

On the one hand, Niedecker has the problems any property-owner might encounter, as described in "Don't tell me property is sacred!" (*Life*, 56) where touring motorists "like to rest" on the speaker's land and leave "beer cans and cellophane" on her "clean-mowed grounds". But two other poems deal with foreclosure and, as Faranda remarks, "both express Niedecker's frustration with proprietorship" (*Between*, 37). More than once Niedecker had to foreclose on her father's cabins and the experience distressed her. At one time she had grave worries about potential buyers, for the other side of the river was becoming a popular holiday area for black professionals from the cities – "I've now foreclosed. The die is cast. I hope it's not black!" (Letter to Zukofsky, 4 Dec. 1962, *Correspondence*, 326). Niedecker professed not to be worried about this on her own account, but were she forced to sell to a black person she knew her neighbours would never forgive her ("I could live here with negroes but my neighbours might move" Letter to Zukofsky, 4 Dec. 1962, Austin)[5] and she relied on their goodwill in giving her lifts into town for work, among other things. Earlier letters reveal more of Niedecker's ambivalent attitude to racial integration. In 1957 she describes a trip to the cinema in Madison: "dropped in on the movie Island in the Sun from the Waugh story – brilliant color, like the sun heating your skin. And it was about color – natives of an island in the British West Indies as against English rule. So I traveled a long way and came home to *my* color problem, too close a heat" (Letter to Zukofsky, 26 Jun. 1957, *Correspondence*,

236)[6]. Later she remarked, "passed a statue of Robbie Burns in Milw. – his face black from the weather – like a negro's but a man's a man for a' that" (Letter to Zukofsky, 22 Jul. 1960, *Correspondence*, 265).

The first of the foreclosure poems (*Life*, 95) seems to touch on the "color problem".

> To foreclose
> or not
> on property
> and prose
>
> or care a kite
> if the p-p
> be yellow, black
> or white.

It was probably regarding this poem that Niedecker wrote to Corman: "foreclosing on a tiny piece of property I never wanted anyhow – left me by my father – have thrown some passionate peeve into a poem (this week) about it" (Letter to Corman, 3 Jan. 1963, *Between*, 35) and a letter to Zukofsky describes, "poem on foreclosing. Venom against property, the law etc." (Letter to Zukofsky, 4 Jan. 1963, *Correspondence*, 327). "Foreclosure" (*Harpsichord*, 37) is equally as passionate, though here the language of the law is mocked ("their parties thereof", "my cement abutments", "clause of claws"), while the law itself is seen as predatory and injurious ("claws", "scratch") and the speaker finally pleads, "May prose and property both die out/ and leave me peace". It is interesting that in both poems property and prose are equated, perhaps implying that both are equally cumbersome to the speaker, though in "Foreclosure" "prose" could be the lawyer's jargon the speaker derides. Faranda suggests that, "prose and property are connected by their tendency to mire [Niedecker's] vision (. . .) and to proliferate unnatural connections to the world. Both are anethema to the clarity and stillness she achieved in her 'condensery' " (*Between*, 37).

I have already quoted Penberthy's description of the poet's "preoccupation with war" in the early poems, though again the theme runs through all of Niedecker's work, and again the tone and thrust of the poems vary. For example, poems "about" war have been included in two collections of Niedecker's work but a poem like "Bombings" (*Life*,

27), describing how people used to sleep in the London Underground stations during air raids, does not emphasize the horror and futility of war, nor its place in politics. Certainly some other poems excluded from editions are similar in tone, like "Allied convoy/ Reaches Russia" (*Collected*, 143) but of the better-known "war" poems most, for one reason of another, lack the biting irony or sense of waste evident in several lesser-known poems. This could be because Niedecker seems to have written these poems after hearing or seeing news broadcasts of the events she describes, which may partly account for their "distanced" tone, the impression that we are kept at one remove.

Perhaps one of the most memorable of the better-known "war" poems is "Tell me a story about the war" (*Life*, 43), a nursery rhyme explanation of how government and church try to con people into believing everything is fine, despite the hunger and sleepless nights caused by war and the occupying army. The poem's jingling couplets are highly effective. However the very success of this form has led critics away from the starkly contrasting subject of the poem. Cox has commented, "Lorine Niedecker domesticates sharp and diverse elements, even upheaval . . . So affairs of state turn into nursery rhymes" ("Niedecker," 30-31). Perhaps unintentionally, Cox's statement trivializes not only the "nursery" poems but also their content, and unfortunately few critics have seen Niedecker's choice of the nursery rhyme form as significant. DuPlessis points out, "we know that certain 'nursery rhymes' were old political jingles of oppositional mockery and carnivalesque puncturing of authority. This is a new goose aspiring to the same political function" (111). This reference to the "carnivalesque" qualities of Niedecker's nursery poems is interesting. Julia Kristeva describes the carnivalesque as rebellious and subversive, and remarks that it has "understandably acquired a strongly derogotary or narrowly burlesque meaning in our society" because of this (79), though its relation to folk forms may be another reason for this derogation. Another critic suggests that Niedecker may have used "nursery" forms because she liked "the swiftness of their rhymes and the way they can disguise darker, more menacing emotions" (Kleinzahler, 10).

"Brought the enemy down" (*Life*, 52) also has its impact dulled because of its poetic style; although it describes the bombing of Somerset House, the main energy and

interest in the poem derives from its play on words: "down / descendents / up / staircase / records / down / Shakespeare". Other, more exposed "war" poems are difficult to understand, like the surrealist "Wartime" (*Life*, 52). Without the title this poem would be even more obscure and indeed it seems to involve more than just war (references to "Joe", "Mary", the "baby" and "enlightenment" are intriguing). The poem is apparently about protecting children from wartime hazards – "upheaval", "noise and flame" – and hoping they will live to grow up, though it ends on a depressing note. On the other hand, "European Travel/ (Nazi New Order)" (*Life*, 50) has a regular form which enhances its impact. The poem implies that all the atrocities and suffering of war and wartime can become, to the people enduring them, unremarkable; the regular almost monotonous rhythm and rhyme suggest people so dulled and desensitized by long suffering that they no longer see it as anything but normal. The closing line articulates this feeling: "Crossed to Sweden tho one in our party was shot" – the death of a companion means nothing and things continue as before. Effective as this may be, the poem lacks the energetic opposition of other, less well-known poems dealing with war.

In one very early poem (published as part of a group of three under the title "Memorial Day" though Niedecker termed it "social-banal") Niedecker parodies the language of patriotism and war. In spite of its strong surrealist tendency the poem (*Collected*, 117) is easily comprehensible, or the sentiments it expresses are, and indeed the surrealism adds to the effect.

> Thou hast
> not foreign aggression
> but world disillusionment
> dedicated to the proposition
> of an ice cream cone
> and the stars and stripes forever
> over the factories and hills of our country
> for the soldier dead.

The opening line seems to mock a church which supports the patriotic war-effort while upholding the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" and certainly we know from letters and other poems that Niedecker had little respect for organized religion. Penberthy describes the poems in this group as "assemblage[s] of fragments of newspaper reportage, overheard conversation, and political euphemism," and remarks that "the

often commonplace fragments are transformed by their juxtaposition" (*Correspondence*, 30). Indeed, the ruptured syntax and disjointed phrases reflect the non-sense of the rhetoric of war, which can be repeated without understanding and seems to have no relation to reality. The disjunctive syntax also allows the poem to end with the real outcome of war – the last word of the last line is "dead" – showing the rest as "social-banal" excuses for or justification of killing.

Several other poems on war show surrealist influence, and this serves to make them sinister in tone, as well as suggesting that war is nonsensical. Readers certainly grasp that the poems set themselves against war, and the blind jingoistic patriotism that supports, supplies and glorifies it. The opening lines of "To war they kept/ us going" (*Collected*, 138) imply that wars are driven by forces which send soldiers to the front to fight while themselves remaining in the background. Again, stark "death" is the fate of such soldiers, and although "With time war/ is splendid", and the fallen may be glorified, this is of little use to them when they are dead. The five-line poem "They came at a pace/ to go to war" (*Collected*, 160) seems to indicate a certain eagerness to make war (Penberthy mentions Niedecker's "critique of modern American . . . militarism" *Correspondence*, 42), and the second stanza "They came to more:/ a leg brought back to a face" again apparently shows the end result to be not glory but pain or death.

In sharp contrast, "The number of Britons killed" (*Collected*, 142) makes a very clear statement about war fatalities and, significantly, includes the "enemy".

> The number of Brtitons killed
> by German bombs equals
> the number of lakes in Wisconsin.
>
> But more German corpses
> in Stalingrad's ruins
> than its stones.

After being told that "German bombs" killed the British of the first stanza, it is left to the reader to admit Allied responsibility for the "German corpses" (the chosen noun heightens the horror), thus we are reminded that there is always a "But": in war both sides commit atrocities and even if we are on the winning side we are not necessarily right and therefore justified.

Although many of Niedecker's poems about war were probably written during World War II and take it as their subject, Niedecker continued to include anti-war sentiments in her poetry throughout her writing life. The last line of "I fear this war/ will be long and painful" (*Collected*, 177) tails off, enacting the cutting off in death of those who fight. A later poem, "Spring/ stood there" (*Life*, 102) employs uncharacteristically violent imagery similar to that of "They came at a pace": "Head/ blown off/ (war)". Less violent but more sinister imagery occurs in one of the "In Exchange for Haiku" group, where the poet suggests that a "Beautiful girl/ pushing food onto her fork/ with her fingers" could somehow be someone who "will throw the switches/ of deadly rockets" (Life, 76).

The atomic bomb is mentioned in one of the "For Paul" poems, "O Tannenbaum" (*Life*, 41), and a growing fear of the nuclear age is brought out in the later poem, "The radio talk this morning" (*Pail*, 92). Niedecker's letters also reflect public feeling about the nuclear threat: "Universe War I is coming," (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Mar. 1958, *Correspondence*, 245). "Weather is keeping pace with the black state of the world politically," she wrote at the beginning of the sixties, "Could it possibly have anything to do with nuclear tests?" (Letter to Zukofsky, 27 Apr. 1960, *Correspondence*, 261). We have seen in the previous chapter that "Wintergreen Ridge" also includes references to war and the bomb: "the grand blow-up/ the bomb" (*Life*, 123); "More news: the war/ which 'cannot be stopped' " (*Life*, 125) – another reference to the politics of war.

This last may have been the Vietnam war. Niedecker wrote no poems directly about Vietnam and when Morgan Gibson asked her to contribute to a protest booklet she refused, writing to Corman, "I don't write nor do you in that way, if a poem happens to fit the situation OK" (Letter to Corman, 15 Jun. 1966, *Between*, 87). I have demonstrated already that Niedecker worried about external pressures affecting her poetry and she once wrote, "The trouble with taking a stand against Vietnam (Morgan Gibson) is that poetry falls by the wayside" (Letter to Williams, 30 Jun. 1966, Jargon). To Gibson himself she defended her refusal to get involved: "I share your views for the most part as to Vietnam but for me to get involved in the controversy would be for me to forget poetry. I speak from past experience" (Letter to Gibson, 6 Oct. 1966, *Truck*).

Here Niedecker seems to be acquiescing to the general critical view I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, that to remain art literature must stick to certain subjects – and politics is not one of them. Perhaps too, by the time of the Vietnam war Niedecker felt that she had gained a foothold, however small, in the literary world and that she was not about to throw away such hard-won recognition by becoming part of anything carrying the risk and controversy of Vietnam protesting. She was anxious that Morgan Gibson might lose his job at the University of Wisconsin: "I feared – the university authorities – your status, but I see you'll be back there in September so take it all is well" (Letter to Gibson, 12 Aug. 1966, *Truck*), but she stood to lose all she had struggled to gain – her solitude and her poetry, the most important thing in her life.

Other, mostly younger poets, were less concerned about image, or perhaps more filled with revolutionary fire (as Niedecker had been in earlier years) and did everything they could to persuade the government to give up the war in Vietnam. Morgan Gibson was obviously one of these, Denise Levertov was another. Levertov tried to explain why poets should involve themselves in such "political" activities: "One of the obligations of the writer, and perhaps especially of the poet, is to say or sing *all* that he or she can, to deal with as much of the world as becomes possible to him or her" (123). However, early in her poetic career Niedecker had written: "The effect of propaganda in poetic (?) form has the effect on me of swearing that I as a writer will portray my epoch and truthfully evoke life in its totalities only as I am able to make magic, . . . it has been hard to sell magic – will the time come when it can't be *given* away" (Letter to Harriet Monroe, 12 Feb. 1934, quoted in *Correspondence*, 36).

In a study of Vietnam protest poetry, one critic emphasizes the importance of "seeing the 'war poems' in their proper context" in order to determine:

> (1) whether the war protest is a legitimate and natural outgrowth of the writer's world-view and poetic, (2) whether the experience of the war has altered a poet's belief and practices, (3) whether common themes and attitudes towards war and the culture [sic] are tied to similar biographies and philosophic temper or arise equally well from different backgrounds, (4) whether a poet's protest is grounded in opportunism (protest being the fashion) or whether he is deeply committed, and (5) whether – as has so often been asserted – the protest poetry is generally inferior to the more detached and "objective" work of the same poets . . . (Mersmann, ix)

We might say that Niedecker's early poems about war answered most of these points, seeming sincere and in character, though as these poems are very early, it is difficult to say whether they are "generally inferior" to Niedecker's other work only because of their subject. However, as I have already suggested in this chapter, Niedecker's ideas about revolutionary politics and poetry changed over the course of her life: in 1960 she wrote to Zukofsky after an editor enquired about submissions for his magazine, "If the poems must be political I care not to send" (Letter to Zukofsky, 28 Feb. 1960, *Correspondence*, 260), and she had begun to keep silence about her own political beliefs: "I avoid politics with Harold [Hein] – sometimes ask him what he thinks + say nothing in return" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Nov. 1962, Austin). So too, as implied in previous chapters, did her attitude to the outside world.

In a statement that seems relevant to Niedecker, Levertov remarks, "The spring sunshine, the new leaves: we still see them, still love them: but in what poignant contrast is their beauty and simple goodness to the evil we are conscious of day and night" (124). Towards the end of her life this contrast may have struck Niedecker with the same force as it had in her younger years, yet her reactions changed and she relied more and more on solitude and the natural world as a buffer to the harsher realities of the twentieth century, describing to Zukofsky: "the other thing I've built up in me that, given another couple of years, would withstand the world, would never need any other life but itself and things like money, people's follies and hatreds and all the silly comings and goings wouldn't even be there" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Apr. 1963, *Correspondence*, 331). Both this, and her need for self-effacement may have led her to refuse involvement in Vietnam protesting and to her own censoring of the early "political" poems.

Still it is obvious that we can no longer talk of Niedecker and her work only in terms of place and nature. Despite the many "glib references to a fictional, monkish existence, spent far from civilization" (Sturgeon, 4) and the false image of Niedecker as a kind of poetic hermit, her letters show her to be constantly aware of the world and events outwith her local community. Several poems demonstrate this awareness – "The Badlands" (*Life*, 91), "Churchill's Death" (*Life*, 98), "J. F. Kennedy after/ the Bay of Pigs" (*Life*, 116), "The soil is poor" (*Harpsichord*, 29) – and show that Niedecker could

bring the same powers of sharp observation and subtle delineation to bear on global affairs as on things happening in her own back yard. We have seen that Niedecker seemed to use news reports, sometimes transforming them into parodic or nonsensical satire and even in later life she brought a critical eye to news reports of famous events. Niedecker wrote to Corman how she had watched Churchill's funeral on T. V. (described in the two-part poem "Churchill's Death"): "the Thames, St. Paul's, the solemn faces, Handel on the organ – I found it very moving. I didn't see the mechanical cranes along the Thames dip in salute as the body passed down, but the papers say they did. I hope it wasn't an order, an order from the top" (Letter to Corman, 11 Feb. 1965, *Between*, 54). Niedecker explained to Gail Roub why she had not included this detail in the poem, "I cd. not use this, having used the other kind of cranes" (quoted in *Between*, 54), referring to the subtitle of the first poem, where she was painting "the Whooping Crane" when she first heard the news.

The tension of living in the larger world began to be expressed in Niedecker's letters: "the acceptance of violence people have – facing into the end of the world as tho well, let it come" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Mar. 1958, *Correspondence*, 244); "Well – heavy with thought of international situation – you can see it in everybody's eyes" (Letter to Zukofsky, 12 Oct. 1961, *Correspondence*, 292). At times such fears crept even closer to home, as with the black civil rights struggle in Milwaukee during the late sixties. "Tense situation in Milwaukee," she reported, "We are not sure that Fr. Groppi should be the man to lead the negroes. Each weekend going out to the river I take a box of books and extra clothes in case the roads get blocked and we can't get back into Milwaukee" (Letter to Williams, 13 Sep. 1967, Jargon). As always, Niedecker worried how these events might affect her poetry and she once wrote to Corman, "Wanted to get down to the marsh poem ["Paean to Place"] but impossible from Wednesday on – the shooting of Bob Kennedy and all this violence rife" (Letter to Corman, 12 Jun. 1968, *Between*, 166).

But having a wider outlook does not necessarily involve famous figures and distant locations, and some of Niedecker's poems concern widespread social or human problems, expounding the universal through the particular. Thus she writes about

loneliness ("Not feeling well, my wood uncut" *Life*, 29; "Alone" *Life*, 97; "International Loneliness" *Collected*, 176), old age ("Grampa's got his old age pension" *Life*, 30; "Two old men" *Life*, 62; "Young in fall I said, the birds" *Life*, 101; "Dear Mona, Mary and all" *Collected*, 176), alcoholism ("Mr. Van Ess bought 14 washcloths" *Life*, 28; "Alcoholic Dream" *Life*, 96; "Why can't I be happy" *Collected*, 267), and different kinds of racism ("Black Hawk held: In reason" *Life*, 24; "Pioneers" *Life*, 34; "New!" *Collected*, 167; "When brown folk lived a distance" *Collected*, 173). It is true that many of these are among the better-known Niedecker poems, but they are seen primarily as folk poems, rather than treatments of social issues and problems.

"In a sense," writes one critic on Niedecker, "these are very private poems, intensely grounded in the landscape and controlled by it, which take the mistakes of war and politics as disastrous intrusions" (Bertholf, "Niedecker," 101). Certainly later in her life Niedecker preferred to remain uninvolved (though her second husband Al Millen had been "in the labor movement" Letter to Zukofsky, 3 Apr. 1963, *Correspondence*, 331, and Niedecker once described him as "discussing the economic situation in Newcastle" with visiting British writer Tom Pickard, Letter to Williams, 29 Oct. 1968, Jargon), but I do not think this should be taken entirely negatively. And surely war, if not political fiascos, would seem to most ordinary people "disastrous intrusions" on their everyday lives. The key word in Bertholf's remark is "private" and other critics have tried to define this sense of privacy or intimacy in Niedecker's writing.

As I see it, what these critics are trying to articulate is that Niedecker's poems often have an intimate or personal tone because she deals with her subjects, whether global affairs, social problems, locale or the natural world, so that the particular, personal instance demonstrates for the reader the more general trend of the universal. It is notable that when I looked at poverty and anti-materialism earlier in this chapter, several of the poems were directly about Niedecker's own experience, yet they also had wider implications in the context of Niedecker's social and political thinking. Despite the fact that critics tend to belittle this method of presentation in Niedecker, by their tone and language, if not overtly, I would argue that most ordinary people look at global events or

social problems in this way in order to make them meaningful, and this may be one reason why Niedecker uses this approach.

Many of the most "political" of these poems were written before the publication of Niedecker's first book *New Goose*, when she had no reputation at stake and no critics to please and apparently their reception was somewhat doubtful. "To Maryland Editor, 1943" (*Collected*, 140) incorporates a quotation, apparently from the editor to whom the poet has sent her work, about the incendiary nature of some of the poems – "We couldn't get away/ with these down here/ in the south of the brow/ of Washington" – and as I have implied, despite the fact that Niedecker was alive to supervise the publication of *My Life By Water* and *T&G*, neither of these collections included material that might be considered controversial. Penberthy has noted that although some "Mother Goose" poems are included in the later *New Goose*, "the overtly political poems . . . are not included" and the political content of others is subdued by placing them in a different context; they are then read, Penberthy suggests, as "personal reflections rather than as comments on contemporary deprivations" ("Revolutionary," 92). This holds true for the reprinting of these poems in subsequent collections and selections, and as I have already mentioned some can be classed as folk poems, with emphasis on their language and idiom rather than their content.

In this case I think it fair to say that Niedecker certainly acquiesced in her own silencing. Indeed she seems to have participated in it actively by holding back these early poems from later selections. Of course, it is impossible to say whether she intended or anticipated the end result – the body of her work distorted and misrepresented, and her reputation built entirely on those poems dealing with locale and nature – but I hope the "discovery" of other subjects and styles in Niedecker, and recent work by critics on these lesser-known poems (including my own study) might help to redress the balance to some extent, and to introduce readers to the full range of Niedecker's work and poetics.

II. "Light and silence": Niedecker's critical reception.

5. WOMEN: "these closed in days".

While the previous chapter was more or less a recovery of Niedecker's ignored work on global politics and a revision of the political implications of better-known work on these subjects, this chapter has a three-fold aim. Firstly, to briefly examine Niedecker's treatment as a woman writer by critics, publishers and editors, and colleagues, and secondly, to examine Niedecker's treatment of women in her poetry. From these, I will try to determine some idea of Niedecker's self-image as a woman writer in a predominantly male literary world and how this might reflect her own experience as a woman and a woman writer.

One critic has commented:

> The Women's Liberation Movement, which would probably have been greeted with scant enthusiasm by Niedecker herself if she had lived to note its impact on contemporary poetry, is supremely relevant to her work, yet apparently it might just as well not have happened so far as most folks in charge of her literary remains are concerned. (Clausen, "Necessary," 1)

It is true that until very recently those with any claim to be "in charge" of Niedecker's work have been men – Cid Corman (Niedecker's literary executor), Jonathan Williams, and Robert Bertholf have all edited Niedecker's poetry and have all written on her life and work. Yet, as I have already implied in previous chapters, what these male editors and critics strive to preserve is *their idea of* Niedecker and her work, and this has led to misrepresentation, suppression and partial erasure. It has also given the impression that Niedecker is the exclusive property of certain male critics and editors – I have given an example of this being spelt out in a very overt manner in chapter 1, when James Laughlin gave up his idea of publishing Niedecker's *Harpsichord & Salt Fish* so as not to "set foot in [Williams'] territory". These men have not neccessarily acted deliberately or out of malice, but each has contributed to and helped fix the patterns of light and silence on Niedecker's work.

For years Niedecker has suffered from the patronizing attitude of male commentators who emphasize biography and speculation, perpetuate a false image of

Niedecker and use all the devices available to male critics writing about female poets to belittle Niedecker and her work while seeming to praise and admire both. When she was still alive, Niedecker could and did protest such treatment, complaining about invalid comparisons with Zukofsky (she remarked of one review, "Too much linking of my style with LZ's, i. e. he says I take my Wintergreen Ridge music from LZ – I completely fail to see that" Letter to Williams, 4 Sep. 1969, Jargon) and discussions of "LN *personally* when what we're talking about is *poetry*!" (Letter to Zukofsky, 26 Sep. 1962, *Correspondence*, 321). Once dead, however, such injustices went unchecked.

Unfortunately, Niedecker has been marginalized by feminist critics as much as other literary factions, and it is only recently that women critics have begun to look at Niedecker and her poetry in terms of gender. It has been suggested that this lack of interest was owing to the fact that Niedecker did not write specifically about feminist issues, that "contemporary women poets are expected to take a more oppositional stance" (Perloff, 37). Rather, "as a woman poet [Niedecker] wrote at length about uniquely female experiences," (Walsh, 11) and she has been described as being "aware of a commonness among women, common concerns" (Butterick, 230). Other critics observe that, "the historicity in her short poems and some of her longer ones brings home, without her ever pressing it, how the cramped horizons of her upbringing restricted her particularly because of her sex," (Davie, "Postmodernism," 45) and "Though Niedecker is nowhere tainted with ideology – feminist or other - she is especially sensitive to the circumscribed life" (Augustine, "Woman," 117). It is interesting in the light of the discussion in the last chapter about "suitable" subjects for literature, that this is seen by many as a better option, note Donald Davie's "without her ever pressing it", Jane Augustine's "tainted with ideology", and returning to Clausen's comment from the beginning of the chapter, the implication that Niedecker herself would have rejected the idea of taking a "more oppositional stance". However, Niedecker's identification with male poetic traditions and her occasionally ambivalent portayal of women in her poetry can be problematic for feminist readers – as always Niedecker's work resists easy categorization.

The groups and traditions with which Niedecker is associated are typically male – Modernism, the Carlos Williams tradition, Objectivism – and in these all-male circles Niedecker was positioned uneasily as an insider-outsider. Marjorie Perloff describes Niedecker as "a woman poet identified primarily with the otherwise-male Objectivist movement" (36); Clausen goes further, stating that "in these overwhelmingly male circles [Niedecker] was once again an oddity, the 'poetess' of contemporaries' patronizing praise" ("Niedecker," 11). We have seen in chapter 1 that Clausen has also suggested that Niedecker's choice to stay at home, isolated from literary circles was partly motivated by an awareness of this gender divide. The fact remains that Niedecker was a woman writer among many men, and on a literary level I entirely concur with Clausen's judgement of Niedecker as "almost tragically male-identified" ("Necessary," 3). I have already pointed out that the circle of Niedecker's admirers was almost exclusively male, as were the few local companions with whom she felt able to share her literary thoughts, and though there were a few women writers she mentions with approbation[1], the poets with whom Niedecker chose to enter into any kind of dialogue were all male. This may have been, as Sturgeon believes, "circumstantial" (4) since the kind of poetry Niedecker admired and wanted to write was being written by men, though this in itself could be significant. "She admires male strength and accomplishment," observes one female critic, "and wants similar recognition and outlet" (Augustine, "Woman," 118).

Niedecker was also male-identified in her poetic influences. In 1966, speaking of her poetic development, she wrote, "I literally went to school to William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky and have the good fortune to call the latter friend and mentor" (Letter to Cox, 10 Dec. 1966, "Extracts," 36). The exception is Emily Dickinson. Niedecker was compared with Dickinson often during her lifetime and the comparisons have persisted since. Privately, Niedecker owned Dickinson as a writer she greatly admired and whose work she felt had significantly influenced her own poetry, but more publicly Niedecker admitted her main influences to be Zukofsky and Carlos Williams, as in the statement above. As most of the comparisons were, and often still are, based on superficial resemblances in the lifestyles of the two poets; are angled more towards biography; and tend to state or imply "idiosyncrasy" or "eccentricity" (rather

than "originality" or "individuality"), perhaps it is not surprising that Niedecker had no desire to fuel such speculation by emphasizing Dickinson's influence. Gail Roub describes a private exchange which hints at how Niedecker may have felt about these inevitable comparisons with Dickinson and about her own position as a woman writer among many men. "I had probably known her about a year," recalls Roub, "when I suddenly and directly asked her, 'Lorine, who are you?' Her equally direct reply with a slight smile: 'William Carlos Williams has said that I am the Emily Dickinson of my time' " (38). Niedecker does not herself claim to be the new Dickinson, but quotes male authority, perhaps with her tongue in her cheek.

Despite the shallow nature of many Niedecker-Dickinson comparisons, a closer examination can produce several interesting parallels, as I hope to show in this and other chapters. It is certainly illuminating to investigate Niedecker's references to Dickinson, some of which attach great importance to her as a formative influence. In letters to Zukofsky, Dickinson crops up several times: Niedecker says she will buy a possible new complete edition of Dickinson's poems if it emerges (Letter to Zukofsky, 4 Jul. 1955, *Correspondence*, 163); she mentions buying "Emily Dickinson in paperback" (Letter to Zukofsky, 26 Mar. 1962, *Correspondence*, 308); and comments, "reading E. D. and about her" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Jun. 1969, *Correspondence*, 358). Niedecker's library contained the Peter Pauper selection of Dickinson's *Love Poems*, and a further three books on Dickinson, *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson*, *Emily Dickinson: The Legend and the Poet*, and *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson*.

Clearly, Dickinson was often on Niedecker's mind, and in some letters Niedecker compares her own work with that of her predecessor: "My shorter poem enclosed ends too much like Emily maybe" (Letter to Zukofsky, 15 Sep. 1960, *Correspondence*, 268); "I smile – the two last sentences somehow accidentally Emily Dickinson" (Letter to Corman, 8 Jan. 1970, *Between*, 210). These comments might seem derogotary, but this is perhaps due more to the "anxiety of influence". Niedecker was upset that Zukofsky's *Test of Poetry* did not include any of Dickinson's work (Letter to Zukofsky, 4 Jul. 1948, *Correspondence*, 152) – apparently Zukofsky felt that Niedecker's poem "There's a better shine" would serve to represent Dickinson as well (Penberthy, *Correspondence*,

152-3), though throughout her life Niedecker professed to be unworthy of the comparison with Dickinson ("it still seems too good to me to be mentioned in the same breath with Bill Williams + you – and Emily Dickinson!" Letter to Zukofsky, 26 Sep. 1962, *Correspondence*, 321). It is is interesting that Niedecker's last comment separates Dickinson from the two male poets by the ubiquitous dash, and the most important mention of Dickinson places her above even Zukofsky: "At 57 I have two people ED and LZ after a lifetime, almost, of reading, and a handful of words by Santayana, Marcus Aurelius, Thoreau, Emerson, Liebniz, Plato" (Letter to Zukofsky, 27 Nov. 1960, *Correspondence*, 270). To place Dickinson above all these male writers is a singular admission from Niedecker, and one which I feel we must not underestimate.

Niedecker's position among so many male poets can at times be difficult for a later generation of women writers and critics to understand. She was constantly patronized by her male colleagues and seemed often to accept her role as an inferior. Of course, Niedecker was perfectly capable of independent judgement on poets, and she did not balk at criticizing highly regarded male poets. Indeed, although she is linked with the Objectivist group, she was less than enthusiastic about two Objectivist poets. "Rakosi poems, yes, but not so strong as LZ of course & not so technically original as Williams – right?" she remarked (Letter to Corman, 25 Feb. 1970, *Between*, 217) and once mentioned, "something intriguing" about Oppen, but went on to describe him as "an insect (singing from his knees), all angular, a kind of constipated grasshopper" (Letter to Corman, 30 Jan. 1968, *Between*, 149).

However, in other circumstances Niedecker seemed content to pander to male egos. Accepting her "inferiority" as a woman poet was Niedecker's own choice, but it is difficult to see how she could have done otherwise, being dependent on men for the few admirers she had and, more importantly, for promotion and publication. This can explain the attitude she takes with poet publishers like Corman and Williams. Niedecker's praise of other poets is frequently a self-deprecating comparison at the expense of her own work. On the rare occasions when Niedecker praised her own work, she would generally hasten to assure the male poet to whom she was writing that their work was far superior. For example, in a letter to Jonathan Williams she describes his latest book as "the second

book (of course I've seen some of the poems elsewhere) I've seen as book that *should* get the Pulitzer," adding, "the other one is mine – T&G!" Straight away she follows this up with, "No, actually compared with JW I feel without wit, without essential beauty, certainly without some of those perfect sources you've found" (Letter to Williams, 2 Jul. 1969, Jargon).

We have seen in chapter 1 that although she seemed to have a genuine admiration for Corman's work, more privately Niedecker expressed doubts to Zukofsky whether this kind of poetry was "enough". Of course, it may have been simple politeness that kept Niedecker from sharing these thoughts with Corman, though I am sure male colleagues were less anxious about offending with what was only a personal opinion. In fact, Niedecker's caution was justified – once, early in the correspondence with Corman, Niedecker described his poetry as "conversational-metaphysical" while apologizing for using the term "metaphysical" – "(You won't like the word any more than I do) but you know what I mean" (Letter to Corman, 5 Jun. 1964, *Between*, 46). Corman, apparently did not. Niedecker described to Zukofsky the "kind of sensitive distance" which arose between them (Letter to Zukofsky, 29 Sep. 1964, *Correspondence*, 349), and in her next letter to Corman, she apologized again, obviously not having heard from him since June: "Please don't mind my 'metaphysical' in my last letter. I meant it but evidently didn't use the right word" (Letter to Corman, Oct. 1964, *Between*, 48).

Of course, the most important male poet to Niedecker was Louis Zukofsky, who had a formative influence on both her life and her poetry, and it is perhaps on this unequal, tormented and difficult relationship that Niedecker modelled subsequent exchanges with male colleagues. Breslin has no doubt as to who was the dominant partner and describes the relationship as fulfilling "a particular gender role, that of admiring pupil to a powerful male mentor" (141). As Niedecker developed her poetics she began more frequently to challenge or ignore Zukofsky's suggestions for changes to her poems; however, the efforts of several women critics to show Niedecker as a more equal partner in the relationship are not entirely convincing. Niedecker does assert herself in some letters, pointing out lapses in Zukofsky's spelling – "But Toots, notice in first line, avaluation – change first a to e, sieze?" (Letter to Zukofsky, 28 Mar. 1949,

Correspondence, 152); or emphasizing the importance of *her* writing – "Thinkin up some lines! Sh..." (Letter to Zukofsky, 28 Sep. 1949, *Correspondence*, 162) but the correspondence is full of dark undertones and Niedecker's at times almost nauseating self-abasement. Yet in the face of this tension and several disappointments, Niedecker rarely, if ever, said a word against Zukofsky and continued to champion him as a paragon of poetic virtue.

From the first, the story of their sexual liason and its resulting abortion shows the dynamic of power, and Niedecker's forced dependence as a woman – Zukofsky persuaded her against her wishes to terminate the pregnancy, and she had then to borrow money from her father to pay for the operation. We have seen in chapter 1 that even later in life Niedecker declined Jonathan Williams' first offer to publish her work, led by the difficulties of the relationship with Zukofsky and problems of gender to self-erasure. In a letter to Zukofsky, Niedecker describes Williams' review of *My Friend Tree*: "And you, my mentor + champion, he says – true, but I was very careful this shdn't come from *me* so's not to embarass you – maybe it might, I don't know" (Letter to Zukofsky, 26 Sep. 1962, *Correspondence*, 321). In fact, the question of influence and the relationship between the two *as poets* is less clear-cut. Penberthy states: "They learned a great deal from each other. She eagerly acknowledged her debt. He acknowledged his but less often and obliquely. She was inclined to accept her indebtedness just as he was inclined to allow her to" (*Correspondence*, 6), but she does not suggest that gender, rather than personality, might be at least partly responsible for this discrepancy. Eventually, however, Niedecker could admit, though still with apparent pain at the realization, that her emotional attachment to Zukofsky was not so important to her as poetry: "In after years if they talk about me and ask 'Was she ever in love,' they'll have to say, 'Yes, she was in love with Zukofsky's words'," (Letter to Zukofsky, 12 Jan. 1947, *Correspondence*, 142). Adrienne Rich has noted, "We have been required to tell different lies at different times, depending on what the men of that time needed to hear" (188).

I will now turn to Niedecker's poetry, and look at how it deals with women, their occupations, their roles in society, their relationships with men, and their feelings. Niedecker, an independent working woman, was certainly aware of discrimination and

knew enough about it to produce a pointed description of a job interview, where the dynamics of gender and power are unveiled. "Keen and lovely man moved as in a dance" (*Life*, 54) casts a man as employer with a woman in the subordinate role of prospective employee (the job in question seems to be some kind of secretarial or clerical post). But the poem is also about appearance and reality, the false faces we present and the set (gender-defined?) roles we find ourselves playing. Nothing is what it seems and the irony is biting.

The man is, in the words of one critic, "superficially cultured, seemingly considerate, but ultimately condescending" (Walsh, 13), and Niedecker's language parodies this: he is "keen and lovely", "considerate", has "sensitivity" and "he knew music art./ Had a heart". But he is acting out set motions, "as in a dance", and soon reveals that he is looking not at a prospective employee but a woman to be flattered and seduced: "With eyes like yours I should think/ the dictaphone, or did he say the flute?" Obviously the woman is confused, uncertain how to interpret his advances; the man's apparent "sensitivity" "stops" her rebuffing him as she might otherwise do. So he ends up at her place and the neighbours gossip – "she's taking lessons on the dictaphone" (again, "as tho" shows the discrepancy between what is said and what actually happens). The final crushing line stands alone, like the woman who has been used and abandoned. She failed to see him clearly and failed to win any kind of respect: "He gave the job to somebody else."

Poems about more independent women can give an unfavourable view, however. Indeed, it is difficult to read "What a woman! – hooks men like rugs" (*Collected*, 165) as anything but a derogatory protrait of a mercenary, manipulative woman who "preys" on vulnerable men. The sustained image of rug-making shows the woman using men, "clipping" (clipping their wings?) and "hooking" (keeping a tight hold), moreoever she uses "old wool", determined to squeeze the last usefulness (money or property) out of her material. The final, almost comically gruesome images add to this picture. "She covets the gold in her husband's teeth" – she is waiting for him to die so she can dig out the last remnants of wealth (since her prey is plural "men" we might assume she deliberately picks "old wool" so it will soon wear out and she can begin again). Further,

she is so eager for money that she will "sell dirt" or "sell your eyes fried in deep grief": here the pun on grease-grief adds a touch of pathos but the main idea is absurdly macabre – eyes sizzling in a pan like eggs. The fact that both images are specifically domestic only adds to their effect.

This analysis would certainly seem less than sympathetic towards women, but we must remember that this is only one woman: there are all kinds of people of either gender, and Niedecker is not one to take a biased view. Also, on a more biographical note, Niedecker witnessed her father's extra-marital affair with just such a woman, who bled him of the family savings and then dropped him. Of course, it is true that some women turn their energies to manipulating men, gaining what they may see as the only kind of power within their reach. Indeed, at first sight the exclamation "What a woman!" might be one of admiration.

In periods of unemployment Niedecker must have experienced the life many women lead, that of housewife. Niedecker admittedly detested housework and housewifely tasks, which diminished her writing and reading time. In one letter to Zukofsky she remarked, "Tell Celia I clean house nights like she does. It seems such a waste of daytime" (Letter to Zukofsky, 11 Apr. 1948, *Correspondence*, 147). However, Niedecker seems to have had some sympathy with woman lacking her own consuming interests. In "What horror to awake at night" (*Life*, 48) the speaker has let herself fall into humdrum domesticity and is so taken up in mind-numbing routine that she has not realized how hollow her life is – "Time is white" suggests drab colourlessness, and that time is blank and meaningless when each day is the same. She wakes in the night and experiences with "horror" the revelation, "I've spent my life on nothing". The final line of the stanza, the refrain of the poem, stands out by its exclusion from the rhyme (implying sameness, the fixity of domestic life?) of those preceding it.

The second stanza elaborates this "thought that stings" (this also carries on the mosquito image from the first stanza) as the woman realizes that even her social contact is trivial – "How are you. Nothing,/ sitting around with Something's wife." Husbands may be "Something" but their wives are "Nothing" who just "sit around" passively chatting ("buzz"; again the mosquito image) and the refrain "I've spent my life on

nothing" reiterates this waste. The housewife is, in the final stanza, "pillowed and padded", insulated from reality and stimulation, possibly overweight and out of condition from "sitting around" (she is also "pale" from being constantly indoors), so that even household tasks leave her breathless and "puffing". Her life is full of inert "stuffing" ("carpets, dishes/ benches", the "fishes" mentioned are presumably to be cooked and therefore also lifeless), and useless repetitive chores. Not only has she spent her life "on nothing", doing nothing, she has also spent it "in nothing", in a sterile, vacuum-like environment.

As well as showing the problems inherent in the restricted domestic life of women, Niedecker also looks at some of the problems that might await them in marriage. "I rose from marsh mud" (which Niedecker considered one of her best, see Letter to Corman, 19 Sep. 1960, *Between*, 24) is, perhaps surprisingly, included in all the selections of Niedecker's work though until recently it has not been discussed in terms of gender roles and society's expectations of women. The poem (*Life*, 66) describes a wedding, but even at the outset marriage is seen to be bleak and is connected with organized religion (which Niedecker disliked) and materialism, as we have seen in the previous chapter. The "sweet green, noisy" home-place contrasts the drab, regulated life the bride now faces, a life ruled by materialism ("rich", "diamond", "collects", "silver") and containing only artificial beauty ("diamond fronds", as opposed to "algae, equisetum, willows"). The bride is small and helpless ("little"), perhaps scared or apprehensive ("white"). Whiteness could also signify innocence, the bride is as yet uninitiated into the "secret" of marriage (and sex?); further she is blank, waiting to receive her husband's wishes, orders and opinions. The bride is weak and subordinate, a "slave-girl". Indeed, she is given to her master "for life" only "to serve/ silver" (implying either money and materialist aims, or perhaps serving from silver dishes), she is owned "possessed" and will never be free again.

This is a feminist reading, but Niedecker makes it clear in writing about the poem (it is one of the few about whose writing process anything is known, see chapter 3) that to her marriage was as much a trap for the man as for the woman, if not more so. In a letter she describes, "the little slave girl bride and the worse slave, her husband", her

sympathies clearly lying with "the male sweating it out while the other collects Internatinal Sterling Silver and dons and takes off satins and continues to sweat to pay for 'em" (Letter to Zukofsky, 22 Jun, 1948, *Correspondence*,151). Despite her understanding of the "horror" a housewife's life could be, it would seem – perhaps because of her own independence and lack of luxury – that Niedecker held in contempt women who pampered themselves at their husband's expense. This is demonstrated again in the next poem: considering Niedecker's opinion of consumerism and materialism, it is not surprising that she saw a marriage linked to them as a source of misery.

This second poem deals with the commercialism surrounding marriage, parodying the language of advertising. Since there are four versions of the poem given in *From This Condensery* and it is unclear which was finally decided on by Niedecker, I give in full the version to which I will refer (*Condensery*, 72).

> So you're married young man,
> To a woman's rich fads –
> woman and those "buy! buy!"
> technicolor ads.
>
> She needs washers and dryers
> she needs bodice uplift
> she needs deep-well cookers
> she needs power shift.
>
> A man works in two shops –
> home at last from this grave
> he finds his wife out
> with another slave.
>
> Oh that diamond-digging St. Louis
> woman was a breeze –
> now the gals got you trembling
> before a deep freeze.

Here the husband works as hard as he can ("works in two shops", in another version "works twice"), indeed works himself almost to death ("this grave") so that he can provide his wife's "rich fads", buying her all the things she "needs", only to find she is seeing another man while he works late. Yet Niedecker seems more dissatisfied with commercialism than the women (and men) who fall victim to it – the " 'buy! buy!'/ technicolor ads" tell the bored housewife she "needs" all these new appliances (so that

her home is more efficient and she is therefore a better wife), and the advertiser's non-existent stereotype makes her feel unattractive and in need of "bodice uplift". Perhaps money is all the wives feel they can get from their marriage: since their labour saving devices cut down on time spent doing housework, they become bored waiting for their husbands to come home from work and look for some distraction (another man).

In this poem Niedecker presents a no-win situation and the last verse suggests this rat-race mentality, with the "diamond-digging St. Louis/ woman" showing the other women that they are getting behind and encouraging them to press for more. This description, presumably derived from "gold-digger", is striking and could also suggest a woman bent on marriage (diamond engagement rings) while "breeze" implies not only her air and attitude but the fact that she is a wind of change. The last lines sum up, with "the gals" combining the confident tone of the ad-man, the patronizing diminutive of the sexist, and an attempt at the sophistication of the St. Louis visitor. Everyone is left "trembling" (with fear or cold) "before a deep freeze" – literally another expensive but "necessary" household appliance, but also the early grave the husband is heading for, and the prospect of a frozen marriage, a life without warmth.

Another view of marriage, this time in later life, is given in "I married" (*Pail*, 93). Niedecker married for the second time when she was in her sixties and her relationship with Al Millen, described by one critic as "full of ambivalences" (Walsh, 15), had downs as well as ups. Penberthy believes Niedecker intended "I married" as "a persona poem with some autobiographical elements" (*Correspondence*, 80) and we have seen in chapter 2 that Niedecker described the genesis of this poem as "rather spontaneous from a folk conversation and some of my own dark forebodings" (Letter to Corman, 20 Jul. 1967, *Between*, 129). Indeed, the poem is very "dark", offering no more than "a slit of light" for hope. The reasons given for marrying in old age are more practical and realistic than romantic – "for warmth/ if not repose" – but what one gets in the end is just "someone". The relationship seems uncomfortable, restricting – "We lay leg/ in the cupboard, head/ in closet". Each new day brings silence ("no bird dawn") and the wife feels she is "living unburied" (as good as dead?). One specific problem is the husband's drinking ("he drank/ too much"), but the whole marriage seems problematic, and in a

biographical context the poem certainly suggests "the tensions for [Niedecker] between the marriage and her life of thought" (Walsh, 17) – note the juxtaposition of "I thought/ he drank". The dash which ends the poem could signify a turning back on itself, with the wife's thoughts running in inescapable circles.

Moving away from specifically marital relationships, the poem "Wilderness" is interesting in that it examines the man-woman relationship from the point of view of gender difference, natural and perhaps unbridgeable. It appears in Niedecker's last collection *Harpsichord & Salt Fish* (24) and although the poem is not so completely surrealist as the "Subliminal" sequence from the same collection, its images are still disturbing and resist being tied to meaning. He is "the man", her "other country" (presumably the "wilderness" of the title), implying distance, and she finds it "hard going", encountering difficulties. He is "prickly", "sudden", "violent", a "storm", then a "torrent", setting in motion a chain of destruction – yet the images are all natural and this may soften their impact by making them seem inevitable and unemotional. He is obviously important to the speaker, for the poem is addressed to him and four of its seven lines begin, "You", yet the final picture is of the (female) "wounded doe". As I have suggested, it is not certain what the poem "means", but it shows clearly the differences between men and women and the difficulties they can cause, especially the potential dangers (physical or otherwise) for women, forced by society to be the weaker partner.

"There is a strong sexuality throughout much of Niedecker's poetry that runs just beneath the surface," writes one critic (Walsh, 14) and although this may not fit with our usual image of Niedecker it is certainly apparent in a poem like "Sewing a dress" (*Life*, 115). The "need" in the first line is ambiguous but seems to be an internal, personal need. It is a desire for freedom ("the need/ . . . / to move") arising from "closed-in days" – perhaps a time of bad weather, or more generally, the restricted, sometimes wholly domestic life of women. This need, however, is also directly connected with the man; the speaker longs to show herself off to him ("to move before you") in her new dress, proving that she can be exotic and attractive ("smooth-draped", "color-elated") – note the sensual imagery and the sexual overtones of "elated". She is looking for something

fresh and positive, "a favorable wind" to blow away the cobwebs of daily routine and breathe new life into their relationship.

Once recognized, it is not difficult to detect this undercurrent of sexuality elsewhere in Niedecker's poetry. Two other poems in the "Traces" sequence, from which "Sewing a dress" comes, also contain sexual implications – "Ah your face" (*Life*, 115) speculates on the potential "warmth" of a partner, as opposed to physical appearance; and "Smile/ to see the lake" (*Life*, 113) plays on the language of sexual predators ("lay", "out for an easy/ make"). An earlier poem, "Club 26", is charged with sexual energy and sensuality ("luscious", "caress") transmitted through imagery of plants and flowers, and culminating in the vivid last line, "We stayed till the stamens trembled." Similarly, in "The men leave the car" (Life, 87), Niedecker describes both men and women in terms of natural objects: "These men are our woods", "I'm swamp/ as against a large pine-spread". "O late fall" (*Life*, 77) from the "In Exchange For Haiku" group, uses an unusually violent sexual image to convey the bleakness of feeling inspired by the desolation of approaching winter – "I/ raped by the dry/ weed stalk." Perhaps it is only surprising to us to come across this evidence of sexuality in Niedecker because of the misrepresentation she has suffered, and the erasure of her identity as a *woman* writer.

However, in using the natural world as a figure for (female) sexuality, Niedecker takes her place in a line of women poets which includes Dickinson, Rossetti, and H. D., who all employ the same strategy, though perhaps for slightly different reasons. Discussing the problems female poets encounter, one critic states: "unable or unwilling to . . . confront fully the truth of their own experience and feelings as women, poets from Anne Bradstreet and Christina Rossetti to Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop have tended to suppress in their verse unacceptable elements within themselves," (Bennet, 16). These "unacceptable elements" could include female sexuality, especially female desire. Poets like Dickinson and Rossetti may have sublimated their sexuality in images of nature because of the repressive society in which they lived and wrote, while H. D. could have chosen this subtle presentation because she wished to represent "unacceptable" lesbian or bisexual eroticism. However, for Niedecker (and the other two women writers mentioned by Bennet) the problem may have been, as I have suggested, that women

poets had to erase their own gendered sexuality in order to gain recognition or success in a male-dominated literary world. Rich is again aware of this problem, "Lying is done with words, and also with silence." (186).

As we have seen, many women writers, discouraged by a world dominated by male achievement, seek out new sources of female hope or tradition, rediscovering or "revisioning" women who have earned their own fame or prestige. Niedecker too looked for inspiration in the lives and work of other women and she owned several biographies of famous women as well as editions of personal papers (letters or journals) written by such women[2] (her three books on Emily Dickinson point to an interest in Dickinson's life and legend as well as admiration of her work). Among Niedecker's poems about famous or historically significant figures are some which deal with women. For example, along with Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Niedecker wrote about Adams' wife, Abigail: she remarked to Zukofsky, "Trying to do a poem about Abigail Adams – what a gal!" (Letter to Zukofsky, 31 Dec. 1961, *Correspondence*, 297), while in another letter she described Abigail as "a wonderful original woman" (Letter to Gail and Bonnie Roub, 23 Jul. 1970, quoted in *Between*, 201). The poem "The Wild and Wavy Event" (*Life*, 84) is an exploration of the Adams' marriage (unusually giving a favourable view of the marital state) which incorporates some material from their correspondence. Abigail reappears in another poem, "Three Americans", where she is seen in relation to Adams and Jefferson (*Pail*, 102). In fact she is their equal ("an architect/ and a woman artist/ walked beside Jefferson", note also the familiarity of "John/ and TJ"). She is shown to be creative on a domestic scale ("cheesemaker/ chickenraiser") but she is also a talented writer as seen from her "letters", and her creativity is generously used to benefit others. Indeed, the letters are linked with her domestic abilties in the effective "letters that John/ and TJ could savour" – she provides not only food for their bodies but food for their minds.

While Abigail Smith Adams may have been the kind of woman who encouraged, supported and befriended famous men while remaining in the background herself, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley should have been famous in her own right. Yet in her poem on Mary Shelley (*Life*, 57), Niedecker seems aware of the gap between possibility and fact: Mary is "on the triple crossroads between anonymity, erasure, and renown" (DuPlessis,

100), and the poem begins "Who was Mary Shelley?" For although Frankenstein is now more famous than anything Percy Shelley created, few remember the name of the original author, nor even the original story. Niedecker implies that Mary is now known only as Shelley's wife, suffering the anonymity or non-identity of women forced to take their names from men – "Who was Mary Shelley?/ What was her name before she married?" We are given a few bare facts of Mary's life, again these rely on others for their interest: "She eloped with this Shelley", "She rode a donkey/ till the donkey had to be carried". Yet Niedecker also subverts society's view with her casual reference to Mary's famous husband as "this Shelley".

We are reminded that "Mary was Frankenstein's creator" and Niedecker draws a striking contrast between the woman artist actively working on her "creation" (the word choice seems significant) while the men just talk ("Byron, Shelley/ talked the candle down"). Some critics have paralleled Mary's situation with that of Niedecker: Walsh remarks, "one senses in the poem, a creator working apart from male intellectual companionship – a condition, except for rare instances, of Niedecker's own life" (18), while Penberthy comes from a slightly different angle, "Between the lines of this poem must surely lie Niedecker's awareness of the longer shadows cast by Zukofsky, her partner in the eyes of the literary world" (*Correspondence*, 82). But Mary remains a mystery, and again Niedecker asks, "Who was Mary Shelley?" She was an intelligent, well-read woman who "read Greek, Italian", but these few bare facts are not enough to reconstruct the identity of this all but erased foremother.

A woman may be remembered for her children, but here we draw a blank.

She bore a child

Who died
and yet another child
who died

In fact, this is hardly accurate – Mary gave birth to four children; two lived less than a month, one died aged three, while one survived, succeeded to the Shelley estate, married and apparently lived a full life. Mary also had one miscarriage. Of course, Niedecker did not attempt to produce precise factual accounts in her poetry, but none of the other

historical or biographical poems contain "errors" of this magnitude. It is very unlikely that Niedecker was unaware of the facts as she had a biography of Mary Shelley in her collection at home (see note 2), and we must conclude that this distortion was deliberate. Admittedly it makes an effective ending for the poem, engaging our sympathies for this remarkable but little-remembered woman. Bearing in mind Niedecker's own early abortion and subsequent deep regret at not having children, and more recent theories about the effects of those infant deaths on Mary Shelley's writing, I do not think it too far fetched to suggest that, at the very least, Niedecker was drawn to Mary because of this shared tragedy and disappointment.

"I would hope . . . that serious readers are not distracted from the fact that, whatever her slightly old-fashioned Midwestern spinster image, Lorine Niedecker was a literary artist of the first rank," wrote one perceptive male critic (Eckman), skimming the surface of the problems encountered by women writers. For we must not forget that, "our assumptions about what kind of person can be a literary genius, what kinds of subjects great literature can discuss, our notions of who can be a hero and who cannot, notions of what constitutes heroic behaviour, significant activity, central issues" (Tompkins, 199) have been shaped by generations of male writers and critics. Women are not often considered to be "the kind of person who can be a literary genius", and the subjects they choose are not considered the "kinds of subjects great literature can discuss", much less "significant activity" or "central issues" – for example, the use of domestic imagery in poems like "What a woman!", or a portrayal of the "horror" a woman's restricted life can be.

Even a male-identified poet like Niedecker must have felt the problems inherent in her position as a woman writer. On a biographical level different things were expected of her both as a woman and as a woman poet. "She made choices at odds with her culture's expectations of her as a woman in order to free herself as a writer," remarks one critic (Breslin, 142-3), but these same liberating choices led to a restrictive literary life. "Without predecessors to whom they might appeal or upon whom they might model themselves," writes one critic of women writers, "they have either fit into the existing masculinist tradition, or they have worked within a subcultural traditon of their own –

the literature of the 'poetess' " (Bennet, 4). Niedecker seemed to do the former, and though she was occasionally described as a "poetess" her remarks on this point are ambivalent.[3] However, what small evidence we have indicates that Niedecker was proud of her achievement, commenting once on the latest Jargon folder, "I'm the only woman mentioned – only writin' one" (Letter to Zukofsky, "Easter" 1961, *Correspondence*, 278). Nor was she averse to identifying herself specifically as a woman poet – "Midwest writes me that Joanthan Wms. told 'em about MFT so they're reviewing it for #5 which is going to be an American Women Poets issue so asked if I'd send poems and I did" (Letter to Zukofsky, 17 Aug. 1962, *Correspondence*, 318) – though as the feminist movement gained momentum (and notoriety), this may have changed.

III. "Such a thing as silence": Silence as an integral part of Niedecker's poetics.

6. CONDENSING: "cut it and just write poems".

I learned
    to sit at desk
        and condense

No layoff
      from this
         condensery

Niedecker's title for the poem from which these lines come, "Poet's Work" (*Life*, 90), shows that to her condensation was a major part of the poetic task. It was certainly one of the most important features of her work, and she once wrote, "Without an instinctive feeling to condense I would never have started writing at all" (Letter to Zukofsky, 18 Feb. 1962, *Correspondence*, 302). In a letter to Corman she described her way of writing: "I write from notes, which always seem to stay notes, grocery lists. I throw up my arms and scream: Write – cut it and just write poems" (Letter to Corman, 14 Feb. 1968, *Between*, 153).

Condensation is not only apparent in Niedecker's poetry: her letters show that she abbreviated constantly, almost always using initials for friends' names, as well as "tho", "altho", "thru" and other random abbreviations. Throughout Niedecker's correspondence with Zukofsky they both used empty brackets "( )" to denote inarticulate emotion. However, Niedecker was much more expansive in her letters than her poetry, often waxing almost lyrical in descriptions, especially of her home. Here too, though, we see the first steps in the condensation process – as Penberthy points out, Niedecker's "news from home often proved to be a rough draft on its way to the condensed nugget of the poem" (*Correspondence*, 8). Incidental evidence of the condensation process can also be found in Niedecker's letters. For example, on her Lake Superior trip she took "a millenium of notes for [her] *magma* opus!" (Letter to Corman, 20 Aug. 1966, *Between*, 94), and although "Lake Superior" may be considered one of Niedecker's long poems, it

is in fact an extreme condensation of the notebooks she filled with material, and indeed of its own first version "Travelers" (which I will discuss further below).

Niedecker's condensery could have been influenced by poetry she admired and certainly both Imagism and Objectivism put forward condensation as a must for poetry. Though an early poem demonstrates her dissatisfaction with Imagism ("Mourning Dove" *Collected*, 110), Niedecker was influenced by it to some extent, and one critic remarks that her "early poems can be seen as epitomizing Imagist practice" (Augustine, "Evolution," 278). In fact, later poetic traditions were influenced by this aspect of Imagism as well as others (for instance, meticulous attention to detail, observation of particulars). Pound's several injunctions on condensation, which influenced many poets in his lifetime and after, must also have struck a chord. In the 1913 essay, "A Few Dont's by an Imagiste", Pound wrote, "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something . . . Go in fear of abstractions" (201-2). Later, in his *ABC of Reading*, Pound claimed, "I begin with poetry because it is the most concentrated form of verbal expression" (6). Here Pound sets out his dictum "dichten=condensare", equating the practice of writing poetry with condensation itself. Since Pound saw condensation as essential for, if not synonomous with poetry, he further stated that "incompetence will show in the use of too many words" (*ABC*, 63): Niedecker once wrote, "too many words a habit of the young" (Letter to Williams, 9 Mar. 1965, Jargon). One commentator wonders if Niedecker's "condensery" is a deliberate echo of Pound's "condensare" (DuPlessis, 103).

In fact, Pound's inspiration for "dichten=condensare" was the British poet, Basil Bunting, a contemporary, friend and admirer of Niedecker. Bunting once printed the rules by which he composed his own poetry, thinking they might be useful to other poets. "Fear adjectives, they bleed nouns," he wrote, "Jettison ornament gaily but keep shape." Bunting also advised, "Put your poem away till you forget it:/ . . . Cut out every word you dare./ . . .Do it again a week later, and again" ("I suggest"). This is very close to Niedecker's own method of composition, as I will show below. Zukofsky too believed strongly in "economy of presentation" (*Prepositions*, 12) and the power of condensation – "condensed speech is most of the method of poetry" (*Prepositions*, 20) – but his

formulations of Objectivist theory may have had less effect on Niedecker's work than the pleasure she took in his short poems – " 'A' has ever lived in me like your small poems" (Letter to Zukofsky, 17 Oct. 1961, *Correspondence*, 293).

Condensation – leading to very short poems – has caused problems for Niedecker's reception and she has frequently, as one critic points out, "been reduced to a simplistic version of small perfections" (Dahlen, 9). "A poem of compressed wordplay," writes another, "might turn out pointed or poignant but ran the risk of appearing 'slight': a double bind, for the heavier the load per word, the skimpier the poem looked" (Cox, "Longer," 396). As already implied elsewhere, it is critical preconceptions and value judgements that inform our reaction here: "the scale of [Niedecker's] work is small, the poems deceptively simple – descriptions that conveniently adduce a minor talent, and that consequently will attract little scholarly interest" (Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 3). From the point of view of gender, DuPlessis comments, "[Niedecker] seems to seek a minority, a littleness, a minature scale unthinkable, especially for a woman writer who can be culturally coded as minor no matter what genre she chooses, but especially if she chooses tiny-looking, and folk, forms" (97).

Readers unused to such condensed writing, may find Niedecker's short poems difficult or even intimidating as several critics point out: Davie describes Niedecker's short poems as "daunting or taunting brevities" ("Lyric," 31); Thom Gunn finds that, "her early poems especially, short and bare and awkward, tend to disconcert" (25), while Penberthy mentions, "the challenges posed by [Niedecker's] simplicity" ("Vertical," 979). The "challenging" nature of these condensed poems led to occasional problems with publication too. In a letter Niedecker described one rejection thus, "Weiss returns The Element Mother: 'Perhaps you have cut away too much from these, at least we miss in them some of the cross-grained snazzy detail we enjoy in your work.' !" (Letter to Zukofsky, 4 Feb. 1957, *Correspondence*, 233). Even Corman had some doubts. "That word *slight* again!" Niedecker wrote to Zukofsky after sending Corman some poems, "Tell me what you think he means by too much *written*. . . . I think he means poems by younger writers are more suggestive by not being wordy e.g. Samperi's. . . . I notice Corman says slight but then says they're weighted!" Niedecker added, "I do have to work

to become more concentrated, sharper" (Letter to Zukofsky, 15 Sep. 1960, *Correspondence*, 267). However, even Niedecker drew the line at some point and she once remarked of Robert Creeley's poems that they "often seem too concentrated to arouse and sustain feeling in people who ain't Creeley" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Mar. 1963, *Correspondence*, 330).

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Niedecker found it hard to abandon short forms for more expansive methods of composition, and this move may have been made for more than one reason. "Oh the terrors of the long poem" Niedecker exclaimed (Letter to Gibson, 6 Oct. 1965, Truck) and later wrote, "I'm agin [sic] long poems usually," (Letter to Gibson, 10 Nov. 1965, Truck). At this time Niedecker must herself have been moving towards longer forms, and her letters to many correspondents during the sixties reveal her related tension. One critic describes it thus: "She was uncomfortable with longer forms, yet she felt at this point the need to sustain a poem beyond the short, tight constructions of her early work. She was both fascinated by and resistant to the impulse she felt moving her to long poems" (Faranda, *Between*, 10).

It is interesting that Faranda does not suggest external pressures but at this time, as may still be the case, poets who were or wished to be regarded as "great" based this reputation largely on a long, even epic, poem (often these were lengthy works written in serial form over many years). An obvious example is Pound's *Cantos*, but one could also point to Carlos Williams' *Paterson* and Zukofsky's "*A*". Niedecker attempted nothing of comparable length, but perhaps especially as her own short poems had so often been dismissed as slight, she may have felt under pressure to produce something closer to critical expectations. One appraisal of her work certainly points to changing attitudes after the publication of the later, long poems: "The artistic risk Miss Niedecker takes is to get all that is needful into half a dozen lines. And the risk is real. Perhaps sensing this risk . . . when she came to write North Central (1968) she included two longer sequences, 'Lake Superior' and 'Wintergreen Ridge'." The critic concludes, "They are two of her finest" (Tomlinson, 8). This is not to say that Niedecker did not develop longer forms because she felt herself moving towards more reflective and connective ways of thinking and expression. At one time she wrote, "I'm on a longish thing about Darwin

after I promised myself I'd never write another long poem" (Letter to Cox, 3 Aug. 1970, "Extracts," 41), apparently finding herself attracted against her will by longer forms and expanded scope. However, she still maintained that "a long poem is made up of short ones," (Letter to Gibson, 6 Oct. 1966, *Truck*).

In this context it is interesting to recall Niedecker's affinities with haiku (as mentioned in chapter 3). In a letter Niedecker describes, "the 5-liners with 2 words rhyming [did I create a new form or cremate? – influence of haiku I suppose] which form I'll be using often from now on" (Letter to Zukofsky, Dec. 1956, *Correspondence*, 230). DuPlessis finds it significant that Niedecker should be drawn to "an international style that constructs a formal answer to bigness," (108) but haiku answered other needs as a model of poetry. "From a class perspective the lack of high poetic language (in Anglophone haiku) infuses dailiness and life as it is lived with the possibility of poetry" (DuPlessis, 108). For a poet like Niedecker, who recorded the everyday speech and doings of her folk this must have been attractive in an established form of poetry. Trying to explain the force behind the ordinariness of haiku's subject matter, one critic writes, "Haiku record . . . those moments which for some quite mysterious reason have a peculiar significance . . . We grasp the inexpressible meaning of some quite ordinary thing or fact hitherto entirely overlooked" (Blyth, 8). However, critics have often failed to see the "peculiar significance" of some of the subjects Niedecker chose – one states that Niedecker's poems "are less in danger of being misunderstood than overlooked" (Heller, "Light," 54). "Some poems are short, not because they have been pared clean of superfluities, but because the occasions are so fleeting, so far from momentous, that they are scarcely worth rescuing from silence," remarks another (Davie, "Niedecker," 203). Certainly the early two-line poem "Young girl to marry/ winds the washing harry" (*Collected*, 139) and the much later "Hospital Kitchen" (*Collected*, 265) might attract this kind of criticism and it is notable that such poems are not popular choices for reprinting.

"Another aspect of brevity, the omission of the personal pronoun, is a point of great importance" (Blyth, 317) not only to haiku but also to Niedecker, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Perhaps partly because of this, it has been suggested that haiku

requires some input on the part of the reader – "this simplicity is in itself an appeal to the reader for all his delicacy and depth of poetic feeling" (Blyth, 218). Niedecker described a similar phenomena in her own writing late in life, "I'm trembling on the verge of something, a form of poetic thinking that depends maybe too much on reader's imgination, but we'll see" (Letter to Zukofsky, 7 Feb. 1964, *Correspondence*, 343). Pound wrote, "the reader will often misjudge a condensed writer by trying to read him too fast" (*ABC*, 70) and certainly critics often seem to miss the potential depth to Niedecker's short, highly-condensed poems.

However, as we have seen, Niedecker eventually moved away from haiku-like forms – "I am beginning to worry about the five-line haiku-devised form that dogs me now, it doesn't fit everything" (Letter to Zukofsky, 10 Mar. 1958, *Correspondence*, 243) – she pushed this form to its limits and finally found it inadequate for the scope of her later work. But Niedecker never abandoned condensation, indeed after a lifetime of use it would probably have been impossible for her to give up completely, and though her chosen forms changed, as Faranda remarks, Niedecker's work "was always highly charged with the power of condensation" (*Between*, 8).

Although it may first seem to be a kind of silence, Niedecker often manages to say more by saying less. Below the surface of her poems can lie a depth filled with implication, connection and association. It seems probable that though we do not consciously engage all the extra material in a Niedecker poem, at a lower or subconscious level our mind reacts to the words and how they are put together, taking in the implications or associations, and thus we become aware of the whole atmosphere, the shadows and echoes of depth and tone.

A dictionary definition of "condense" runs thus: "1. to increase the density of; compress 2. to reduce or be reduced in volume or size 3. to change or cause to be changed from a gaseous to a liquid or solid state 4. *Chem.* to undergo condensation [C15: from Latin *condensare*, from *densare* to make thick, from *densus* DENSE]." By being "compressed" or "reduced in size", Niedecker's poems gain "increased density", satisfying the "densare" of "condensare", and perhaps Niedecker would be pleased to

think of her poems as transmuted from the "gaseous" (longwinded? airy-fairy?) to a "liquid or solid state" (like water or rock?).

Niedecker's condensation may be more obvious in the very short poems, but she also applied it to longer poems, by reworking and cutting down until the final version emerged a fraction of the size of the original draft. This was by no means a casual process, witness the oft-quoted lines from "In the great snowfall before the bomb" (*Life*, 61) – "What would they say if they knew/ I sit for two months on six lines/ of poetry?" We have already seen that Niedecker "had to work" for her condensation (above, page 97) and she once wrote, "it's a temptation to write like Yeats, a kind of mellifluous, lush overloading (. . .) but I must not" (Letter to Zukofsky, 23 Mar. 1956, *Correspondence*, 227). "I destroyed a lot of lines," she commented to Zukofsky about some recent writing, "I'm a saint!" (Letter to Zukofsky, 4 Feb. 1962, *Correspondence*, 300). Bertholf tries to give some idea of this process but the scale of his intention and the sloppiness of its execution render his *Condensery* confusing and at times infuriating for the reader. Successive drafts of several poems exist in manuscript form (mainly as enclosures in letters) and it seems reasonable to assume that Niedecker undertook a similar overhauling process for most of her poems. Certainly she was worried about sending poems to be published as soon as they were finished. "Midwest accepts the Club 26 poem," she remarked, "It makes me a little nervous to write for publication! – best if I *just write* now + let 'em lie around for a long time and cull" (Letter to Zukofsky, 21 Aug. 1962, Austin).

"To Paul now old enough to read" (*Life*, 49) exists in an early draft "Crèvecoeur" (*Collected*, 330; *Condensery*, 100) and Bertholf also mentions a shorter version identical to "To Paul now old enough to read" but omitting the first stanza. The difference between the early draft and the finished "To Paul now old enough to read" is massive, the latter containing only a few lines from the body of the substantial early draft; it incorporates the "coda" (almost whole) and includes a few additions. The line lengths have been cut considerably. There is also an early version of "Lake Superior", published as "Travelers" (*Collected*, 336), in which all the parts of the later version (except "And at the blue ice superior spot" and "Joliet") can be detected. Part X of "Travelers" is

completely omitted from "Lake Superior" and two parts of this early version, V and XI (the first becomes "Radisson", the second split into "The smooth black stone" and "I'm sorry to have missed") are cut by about half. Other parts have lines cut in places or are modified slightly. The revision of "Lake Superior" is described by Faranda in her article "Composing a Place: Two Versions of Lorine Niedecker's Lake Superior."

But such ruthless cutting back was not confined to longer poems – one example of the same method in a short poem is given by Bertholf (*Condensery*, 170). "The eye/ of the leaf" (*Life*, 112) was published in *North Central* as part of the "Traces of Living Things" group, but the original draft had a further two stanzas. This condensation shifts the tone and subject of the poem so that it deals not only with the connections between all living things but specifically those between animals (humans) and plants; it no longer attempts to extrapolate this connection or merging to include human relationships as in the original third stanza. The omission of the second stanza further concentrates the poem, keeping it to animals and plants, while "fin" and "feather" also included fish and birds. Similarly, the poem "You are my friend" (*Life*, 36) originally had an extra stanza, later omitted to focus the poem more sharply.

Another interesting sidelight on this issue is the manuscript, "The Very Veery": put together by Niedecker in 1970, she described it as "chosen by LN from main body of poems – to be called The Selected" ("Veery", Boston)[1]. It includes abridged versions of "Paean to Place" and "Wintergreen Ridge", and only the opening stanzas from both "Thomas Jefferson" and "Darwin". This selection might be seen as an extreme form of condensation – the whole body of Niedecker's work cut to twenty-two poems – and the abridgements are especially interesting, since they presumably contain what Niedecker felt to be the essence of these two long poems ("Lake Superior" does not appear at all).

However, I wish to examine how finished short poems with so few words can say so much – this is where Niedecker's power of condensation (reduction of size resulting in increased density) really shows. Kammer writes: "Perhaps the most subtle use of silence in poetry, and at the same time the most familiar to us, comes through the devices of linguistic compression: ellipsis, inversion, syntactic substitution, the omission of connectives in favor of dramatic juxtapositons of word and image" (153-54). Niedecker

certainly displays some of these features, for her methods of condensation consist of a syntactic compression which excludes connectives and punctuation; use of question form; careful word choice, using mainly simple but often loaded words, or those with multiple meanings; also using simple words in a figurative way and creating images by juxtapositioning.

First, careful word choice. Michael Heller remarks that, "Niedecker relies on the fiercest, simplest powers of ordinary words" ("Light," 54) and, as already stated, Niedecker used mostly everyday simple words, though she can include more specialized language, for example, botanical in "Wintergreen Ridge", or mineralogical in "Lake Superior". This does not necessarily make the poems less accessible, for as Davie points out, "Poetry is not made out of such things but of the names that such things bear" ("Lyric," 32). (Another deviation from everyday language is when Niedecker quotes or paraphrases from a textual source, but I will look at this in more detail in the next chapter).

Used in sparing quantities, such words can say much: Faranda speaks of "LN's ability to make me engage the words" ("Letter," 14). It is interesting that one critic writes, "the sparseness and precision invest the language with magical resonances, the words seemingly wiped clean of extraneous matter so that they may register authentic substance and feeling" (Heller, "Musical," 25), whereas my own argument is that these extra associations and connections (with other words in the poem) give depth to Niedecker's short poems. For instance, Niedecker often cuts syntactic connectives, but the remaining words connect with each other, giving different layers of meaning; Niedecker uses words with multiple meanings – obviously this too brings extra material to the poem. It is these features which lead Dahlen to believe that Niedecker's condensing was "undertaken for the joy of seeing how much a few words will bear" (8), and bring Cox to state that although Niedecker's poems are "simple in appearance and sparing in expression, they convey a manifold meaning" ("Niedecker," 174). Crase remarks that "although 'Lake Superior' may at first seem spare of words, Niedecker can be wide and generous within a single one of them" (57) and this seems applicable to many other Niedecker poems.

"Woman in middle life" (*Collected,* 174) consists of three two-line stanzas, the longest line has six words, the longest word is "remember". Yet the poem builds up different layers of connection; repetition for emphasis and a continued contrast. In fact, out of the twenty-one words in the poem, most are used in this way, some more than once, for the layers of connection themselves connect. I give these statistics, as it were, to show how with Niedecker, depth can be added to plain everyday words if they are used in certain ways, and there is consequently no need of extra or extravagant words.

The poem concerns a middle-aged woman's fears of losing her youth, both by growing old and because other people will forget her as she once was. The first layer of connection emphasizes the idea of approaching old age – the woman is "in middle life", bringing her closer to death and in only "a few . . . years after" the time she speaks, old age or death may have overtaken her. "Then" all the woman will be able to do is "remember"; she fears she will be the only one, asking "who'll remember", indeed her worst fear may be that she herself will forget. This emphasis reaches to the end of the poem – the final stanza is in the past tense, as if the woman's vitality has already gone. A second set of connections – the contrast "hot / flash / gleamed" with "cool / black" – suggests heat and light (with their opposites) but could also connect with the first layer. Youth and vitality are warm, brilliant, even precious ("gleaming") but resemble a brief spark ("flash"), soon lost in the darkness of old age and death. Of course, in the poem it is the woman's fears that are "hot" (urgent, burning), yet the word inevitably links with "cool" (growing old is a cooling process) and both opposites mesh with "flash / gleamed" and "black". (Indeed, the woman's fears of old age would not be "hot" unless she still felt young, whereas in a few years, having reached old age, she may be "cool" or unconcerned about it).

Cox remarks: "The most economical form of expression would be by means of a word which happens to have a double sense. The fulcrum of many of the poems is therefore a concealed pun . . . a word working like a two-way switch" ("Niedecker," 32-3). Similarly, another critic states that in Niedecker, "words are often used for amplification, switching and detection" (Meyer, 86). In the poem "Hear" (*Life,* 75) the words in question do not really have double meanings, they are homophones, but the

double sense is equally effective. "Hear" could be "here", the site of the grave, making a further connection with "where"; and the "mourning doves", a well as fitting in with "grave", could be "morning" doves. Keith Bosley comments, "Nothing – not even a chance pun – is wasted" (62). Although Niedecker seldom used titles for her poems – one critic suggests that this was because "Titles are external signals of content, they prepare one for the content that will follow and they often set its limits" (Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 71) – in very short poems such as "Easter" (*Life*, 81) the title brings out the point or pun in the poem.

> A robin stood by my porch
>   and side-eyed
>   raised up
>   a worm.

Another poem, subtitled "Cape Canaveral" and numbered 3 in the "Florida" sequence (*Collected*, 259), shows how words can carry multiple meanings or associations. This extremely condensed poem consists of eight words, or ten including the subtitle which is again integral to our understanding of the poem:

> Space shot off
> man appears normal

The subtitle and series title explain the subject: the U. S. space programme, which sends satellites and rockets into outer space. Thus "space shot" is a satellite launch, yet it also could also imply delays, repetitions and failures – they are having another "shot" at it. Previous attempts may have been put "off", but this time it has gone "off" (echoing the final words of the countdown "blast off"), although things can still go wrong, the rocket may go "off" course. "Man" is presumably the spaceman, the astronaut, though Niedecker does not repeat "space" having used it above. Again there is a hint of potential trouble – the astronaut "appears normal" but all may not be as it seems. The use of "appears" also introduces a visual element, making the tone slightly ironic, for the appearance of astronauts in bulky protective suits and helmets is far from "normal". Niedecker allows a further ironic overtone: should it be "normal" that "man" spends so much time, effort, research and resources on firing rockets into space when they could be distributed elsewhere? (As we have seen in chapter 3, space travel is one of the things

Niedecker seems to disparage in "Wintergreen Ridge" – "I see no space rocket/ launched here").

Perhaps this is over-reading, but I feel it is justified. I do not maintain that all of the associations one word can have will be present at every reading of the poem, merely that some of them will be there some of the time. Further, as already implied, the assimilation of these implications and inferences is an unconscious not a conscious process – it would be ridiculous to assume that a reader could hold all these associations in the conscious mind while reading, but one or two may strike the reader as possible interpretations at any given time. "It's as though these poems, this work," writes one critic, "tricked language itself into becoming a poem, like using beer cartons for seed flats. No waste, nothing left over but the resonant sense of having done it oneself with what was at hand" (Meyer, 90).

Niedecker also condenses by using figurative language. As we have seen poets like Pound, Bunting and Zukofsky believed that too much description and imagery was bad for poetry when used only for decoration – Corman has said of Niedecker, "She didn't oversimplify, but she never merely decorated" (54). However, when metaphor or figurative language adds to a poem it cannot be considered superfluous. Suzanne Juhasz states, "metaphors are the most compressed form of image" (15) while David Lodge remarks, "metonymies and synedoches are *condensations* of contexture [his italics]" (76). This is because the image can suggest further associations and implications for the poem more easily and subtly than if the poet tried to spell them out in another, non-figurative way. Juhasz explains that metaphors are "basically unparaphraseable" since "an understanding of them depends upon imaging rather than explanation" (15) and she comments, "metaphor needs no carefully worked through rational process to be understood, . . . by its nature it short-circuits or by-passes such processes" (264): Cox has described Niedecker's poems as "convey[ing] a manifold meaning beyond the reach of analysis" ("Niedecker," 174).

One reason for this may be that much of the metaphor in Niedecker's poems comes from the juxtapositioning of images. Kammer reinstates the critical term "diaphor" and describes how this phenomenon:

> . . . produces new meaning by the juxtaposition alone of two (or more) images, each term concrete, their joining unexplained (. . .). Rooted in the associational properties of the subconscious mind, its movement is not necessarily linear and does not require syntactic support. Diaphoric poetry is better understood as configuration rather than statement . . . (157)

Thus juxtapositioning can create meaning or connection for images, as in "Get a load" (*Life*, 81). Niedecker does not overtly link the "frog rattle" with "loaded freight cars" but places the two side by side and lets the reader (helped by the use of "rattle") draw out the inference. (The image is also helped by the stanza form, which places frogs and cars in the same stanza, and by the "fr" alliteration). A similar juxtapositioning is found in "Dusk" (*Life*, 82) which I will discuss below. Of course, the subconscious and often non-sensical aspect of this juxtapositioning can relate to surrealism. Niedecker once wrote of this early interest: "Poetry to have the greatest reason for existing must be illogical. An idea, a rumination such as more or less constantly roams the mind, meets external object or situation with quite illogical association" (Letter to Harriet Monroe, 31 Jan. 1933, quoted in *Correspondence*, 21) – though this kind of juxtapositioning of images is not as illogical as that found in Niedecker's surrealist poems. Thus one Niedecker critic writes of her poetry that, "The best of them set one experience alongside another, or in relation to its temporal and spatial determinants, not with obvious intent but with the tremulous certainty of a compass needle" (Cox, "Niedecker," 31). Perhaps because of this element in her work Niedecker's poems often seem to have a kind of mysterious energy despite their apparent simplicity – "enormous heat resides in the bonds that hold each poem together" (Kleinzahler, 9).

Hence, Niedecker's use of simile and metaphor in the poem "What a woman! – hooks men like rugs" (as discussed in chapter 5) describes particular aspects of the woman far more effectively than non-figurative language ever could. Niedecker uses figurative language in different ways, for example, in the poem "What cause have you" from the "Traces of Living Things" group (*Life*, 111), the interest and vitality of the poem rest upon an extended metaphor which is almost a conceit. The reader has no idea about the background of the poem, who is speaking or to whom, but the figurative language sets up a clear and detailed contrast between the speaker and addressee, the

one has "wreathed/ rose words", the other is a "weed" and (a rare repetition for a poet as sparing with words as Niedecker) a "pea blossom weed/ in a folk field". Thus the rose is cultivated, beautiful, sought after; the weed is common, grows anywhere but is welcome nowhere, has no flowers as such, only "blossom", and it is also suggested that weeds have overrun ("run off") the rose. In another poem from the "Traces" group, "Museum" (*Life*, 110) figurative language is used not only to hold the poem together, but also to connect it thematically with other poems in the group. Thus, man is described as "leafing towards you", while the museum is a "dark deciduous hall" – this choice of metaphor (though the latter could be construed as near literal usage if the roof of the museum were made of wood or had wooden beams) fits with many if the poems in the "Traces" group as well as the "Lake Superior" sequence.

Niedecker once commented, "For me the sentence lies in wait – all those prepositions and connectives – like an early spring flood. A good thing my follow-up feeling has always been condense, condense" (Letter to Corman, 18 Feb. 1964, *Between*, 33). Olson wrote of "the convention which logic has forced on syntax," advising that it, "must be broken open as quietly as the too set feet of the old line" (21) and certainly Niedecker cuts syntax until some of her poems read strangely, the "logic" of the old syntax "broken open" by her methods of condensation. "She seeks an alternative syntax," writes one critic, "or, is it possible, an alternative to syntax?" (Butterick, 231). Yet, as with linguistic compression, such condensation can add rather than taking away.

"Dusk" (*Life*, 82)[2] may not seem as syntactically odd as other Niedecker poems for although it lacks connectives and orthodox punctuation, the two dashes enable the reader to make sense of the poem, and indeed its lines could be written out as prose and still be understandable, if not grammatical. Yet the poem displays less obvious syntactic compression. There is only one word, "Dusk" to set the scene for the reader. "He" is not introduced either (the only information given about him is central to the poem) but appears in the middle of our scene, connecting with "man" in the next line. The second line reads as a basic sentence (it could be argued that "He spears" would be shorter but this would not convey continuous action), while the phrase "in spring" connects the two juxtaposed images of man and fish in a "diaphoric" manner. (In this poem Niedecker also

uses a syntactic feature I have mentioned already – the use of "How" giving a false question but I will look at this more closely below).

Unlike "Dusk", "How white the gulls" (*Life*, 75) has no punctuation (except the upper case S in "Soon", implying a new sentence) and the only connective is "Soon", which – like "in spring" above – connects the two parts of the poem. However, this poem would not make much sense written as prose. Because of the use of colours ("white"/"grey"/"yellow") "Soon" provides the required connection between the first and second images of the poem, moving the reader from present to future and the use of "grey weather" (rather than "grey sky") links with the future April and its milder climate. "Soon April", while pared down to the essentials, remains comprehensible, indeed the lack of additional words actually brings us closer to (the word) April, making the future more immediate.

Again, the refusal to elaborate on "the little yellows" adds to the effect of the poem, avoiding detail as to what "the yellows" actually are. Further, using "yellows" alone not only heightens the visual element in the poem, but directly mirrors the glimpses of emerging colour after the dull, monochromatic winter. This usage is another example of figurative language, metonymy: the word used is an attribute or aspect of the thing described. Lodge explains that metonymy is "produced by deleting one or more items from a natural combination, but not the items it would be most natural to omit," (76) pointing out that, "this is where we can detect a specifically literary motivation for the selection of detail" (94). In this case, the "natural combination" could be "yellow flowers" and in choosing to keep "yellow" and omit "flowers" Niedecker not only breaks open the logic of syntax, but also gains further expansion by compression.

However, Niedecker's syntactic compression, perhaps especially her lack of punctuation, is not always as straightforward in its effect. In "My friend tree" (*Life*, 23), for instance, the connective "but" joining both parts of the poem can be confusing at first. Once we realize that the tree has been sawed down because it has been blocking sunlight (perhaps to a window or a flower or vegetable bed) the "but" becomes reasonable – yet this understanding may come slowly and the apparent non-sense of the poem is off-putting. In "Along the river" (*Life*, 23) the lack of punctuation allows two different

readings of the final lines: either "floods" is a verb and "the air/ floods" or it is a noun and part of the list "air", "floods", "silt". Here, both versions fit and the associations of "floods" are not impaired. "I feel I'm on the way to something, especially with lines that look backward and forward," wrote Niedecker (Letter to Zukofsky, 15 Mar. 1951, *Correspondence*, 177-8) and using enjambement in this way can add much to poetry – "sense is drawn out to make several readings possible" (Cushman, 30). Nevertheless, some critics feel that Niedecker's lack of punctuation causes too many problems. Thus Butterick, "in some cases, lack of punctuation is avoiding the issue, where the result is not positive ambiguity or multiplicity of meaning, but uncertainty, diffusion" (231). And Davie, "her suppression of all punctuation but the sparsest . . . must figure in her work as a disabling affectation" ("Postmodernism," 45). It is worth noting that a lack of punctuation is another feature that places Niedecker in a tradition of female writers. Dickinson, for example, has been misrepresented for years because no editor would reproduce her poems punctuated only by dashes.

Taken to extremes compression can be refreshingly humourous, as in the poem subtitled "So he said/ on radio" (*Collected*, 268).

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

After a few readings this makes sense, but condensation causes several oddities (emphasized by Niedecker's line-breaks) which in this case are absurdly funny – like the beautifully ambiguous "my arms" at the end. The syntactic and linguistic compression also echo the subject of the poem, figuring the statue of Venus with its arms lopped off. Penberthy points out a paradox in Niedecker: her condensation is in almost direct conflict with "the wish to incorporate into poetry some of the prolixities of actual speech" ("Variant," 114). In this poem, Niedecker successfully combines speech and condensation, though elsewhere in her work it is usually condensation that wins out – Niedecker retains "speech" but not its longwindedness.

"Poetic thoughts don't rest in our minds with punctuation in 'em," wrote Niedecker, "Thought – in poetry may be something else. I see what you say 'don't have to bother with punctuation if the form is inevitable' – I guess you've got something there" (Letter to Zukofsky, 9 Nov. 1949, *Correspondence*, 165). Thus Niedecker cut out most punctuation from her work, and each punctuation mark that is left must be significant. "Space, words and punctuation are dramatic effects in the poem," writes one critic on Carlos Williams, though it applies equally well to a poet like Niedecker, "They sustain the page as a field of force, making even a period a tangible function of the structure" (Nelson, 202). It also brings expansion, in that a lack of punctuation can lead to ambiguity and variant readings of lines, as we have seen. Thus Penberthy comments on a "For Paul" poem, "[Niedecker] has suppressed all logical connectives between the quoted segments allowing for a variety of alternative contacts between the components of the poem, for a more circular, exploratory reading" (*Correspondence*, 60) – something at which I will look more closely in the next chapter.

Another syntactic feature present in Niedecker's work is the question form, implied question or false question. By false question, I mean for example, the use of "how" in both "How white the gulls" and "Dusk". By using "how", a question word also used as a kind of intensifier, Niedecker does not need to describe the whiteness of the gulls or the slipperiness of man but gives them as bare facts and "asks" the reader to fill in descriptions. Hence, in "Dusk" the reader is "asked" to decide not man's slipperiness, which could be literal or figurative, but its extent (is he as slippery as fish? a fishspawn?). Other poems, such as "Woman in middle life", have directly framed questions and by using direct speech the question becomes more immediate, more gripping (here Niedecker uses speech, but it is not entirely "natural", and far from prolix), further, it heightens the sense of "hot fears" – the woman does not know the answer to her question and this is why it frightens her.

The opposite, I feel, is true of the poem, "Why can't I be happy" (*Collected*, 267).

Why can't I be happy
in my sorrow

my drinking man
today

my quiet
tomorrow

"Why" frames a direct question but there is no question mark at the end of the stanza (as in "Woman in middle life") – because the answer is obvious and the reason given. Indeed, the question may not even be asked of another person for it is exactly the kind of thing one might ask oneself, why? why me? This sense of hopelessness is heightened considerably by the question form and the unanswerable question also suggests the relationship between the speaker and her "man" – it is not one in which such questions can be asked ("quiet", as well as describing the period of relative calm after a drinking bout, also implies an unbroken silence on the subject, they will keep quiet and act as if nothing has happened). This sense of a whole subtext beneath the actual words of the poem – here invoked simply by the use of the question form – is something I will deal with in my next chapter.

Question forms can be found in several Niedecker poems. For example, in "Lake Superior" the poem beginning "The smooth black stone" (*Life*, 109) ends, "why should we hurry home". Again, this lacks a question mark and again the question is not being asked to elicit an answer but to convey a state of mind, in this case the feeling that the speaker wishes to linger, has no reason to "hurry home". The question also sets up another resonance: the previous lines of the poem continue a major theme of "Lake Superior" – the enduring connections between all natural life – and after contemplating such vast forces, any reason to hurry home might well seem insignificant, for the world is home to all. Alternatively, the words could imply the speaker's return to earth as minerals and fibres after her death. An implied question can give just as much additional information, as in "If only my friend" (*Life*, 77). "If only" conveys uncertainty, but to directly ask "when will my friend return?" would create doubt that the friend will not come back, a fear that once voiced will have to be faced, thus "if only" also shows a reluctance to face such fears. The words impart a sense of wistful longing, and show a certain apathy on the part of the speaker; she is dependent on her friend coming back to clear out her guttering, and she clearly wants him to return but she is not willing to act in

order to procure his services, beyond voicing vague wishes. This may again denote a fear of refusal or rejection.

Although I have shown how depths of implication and association can lie below the surface of some shorter Niedecker poems, it is unfortunately true that many critics do still dismiss these short poems as "slight" because of their brevity. However it is necessary to look seriously at Niedecker's practice of condensation in poems of all lengths in order to understand how she has taken on what previous poets had begun and experimented with it, pushing back limits, subverting traditional ideas of poetry and poetics and producing highly original work.

III. "Such a thing as silence": Silence as an integral part of Niedecker's poetics.

7. THE UNSPOKEN: "secret notes".

In the previous chapter I discussed condensation and how Niedecker can get more in by leaving it out. This chapter is more specifically about leaving out, about what is left unspoken. Niedecker's poems can often have a whole subtext below the surface of the text and I have used Niedecker's phrase "secret notes" (from "Paean to Place") to imply such practice. This is one kind of "unspoken" in her poetry and one critic's description of Dickinson seems appropriate: "what is articulated aims steadily at evoking a response to what is not said" (Kammer, 154). Jeanne Kammer also suggests that use of the unspoken arises "in part from habits of privacy, camouflage, and indirection encouraged in the manner of the gently bred female," but that for those (and Niedecker is surely one) with a "reclusive, emotionally vulnerable personality . . . the ambiguity of saying and not saying may be the only acceptable axis for communication" (156).

But Niedecker engages the unspoken as well as the spoken text in other ways. In her study of Woolf, Patricia Ondek Laurence sets out different aspects of what we might think of as the unspoken: "what is left 'unsaid,' something one might have felt but does not say; the 'unspoken,' something not yet formulated or expressed in voiced words; and the 'unsayable,' something not sayable based on the social taboos of Victorian propriety or something about life that is ineffable" (1). I hope to show that Niedecker takes on all of these, and my use of the term "unspoken" includes all three. For example, what I call an unspoken subtext could be either something "unsaid" in Laurence's definition, or something "unsayable". What Laurence terms the "unspoken" and her second definition of "unsayable" are both included in Niedecker's interest in the unconscious and subconscious mind, which can be transmitted through odd juxtapostions, nonsense and surrealist methods.

Unfortunately many readers and critics have missed these unspoken messages and thus insightful and interesting readings of Niedecker have been lost. Niedecker's local friend, Gail Roub, experienced this himself when he began reading Niedecker's poetry:

"some of the poems seemed simple and almost childlike, . . . , but now I know I wasn't listening for the unspoken meanings that characterize so much of Lorine's poetry" (38).

Although it is not stated overtly, it is fairly clear that a poem such as "Grampa's got his old age pension" (*Life*, 30) is really about an old man not wanting to admit how lonely he is now that he is no longer working:

> Grampa's got his old age pension
> $15 a month,
> his own food and place
>
> But here he comes,
> fiddle and spitbox ...
>
> Tho't I'd stop with you a little,
> Harriut,
> you kin have all I got.

Grampa's independence ("his own food and place") does not mean as much to him as company; he is willing to subject his taste and choice to others, running the risk of getting in the way (his "fiddle and spitbox" may both be considered objectionable) and he even feels he must pay in order to gain some human companionship (as well as being accented "can", Niedecker's pun on "kin" suggests that the family will get all the old man owns when he dies, and that they are all he has now). Thus Macherey claims "silence as the source of expression," asking, "is what I am really saying what I am not saying?" (86). That is, the drama stems from subtext, not text. In some cases, I think it is true to say that the real subject of a poem is in fact the subtext, and indeed I prefaced my remarks about "Grampa's got his old age pension" with the statement, "the poem is really about". "Speech eventually has nothing more to tell us:" states Macherey, "we investigate the silence, for it is the silence that is doing the speaking" (86).

Of course, Niedecker is not the only writer to have understood the importance of the unspoken. In poetry, Marianne Moore, speaking of H. D., stated that she "contrived in the short line, to magnetize the reader *by what was not said* [my italics]" (*Prose*, 558). H. D. herself wrote in *Trilogy*, "if you do not understand what words say// how can you expect to pass judgement/ on what words conceal?" (14), while years before Emily Dickinson described, "The undeveloped freight of an undelivered syllable" (58). These

woman poets discovered for themselves the value of the unspoken, and incorporated it into their poetry for reasons of their own. Kammer suggests that, "The use of silence in male writers is often characterized as an acknowledgement of the void, a falling-back in the face of chaos, nothingness; for women there appears more often a determination to enter that darkness, to use it" (158). The unspoken, indeed, is apt for women, who until very recently have been allowed no say in the pages of literary history.

Many Niedecker poems have a personal or biographical subtext. Niedecker herself thought biographical cross-referencing unnecessary, as we have seen in chapter 1, yet as one critic points out, "when the work is as accomplished as the poetry of Lorine Niedecker" the reader may wish to find out "who the woman was who could write so precisely about what it is like to be alive – what world did she inhabit?" (Faranda, *Between*, 1). Of course, the poet's life can be included in the poetry, as in "Paean to Place" and Niedecker's life, perhaps especially her family life, comes into many of her poems. However, we must be wary of reading all poems written in the first person as biography since this form is common in Niedecker's work: she once wrote, "I'm a different character in a different drama with almost every poem I write" (Letter to Williams, 22 Aug. 1965, Jargon). I will look below at some poems which may not seem to have a direct connection with Niedecker's life and experience but, on looking closer, reveal an unspoken personal subtext.

Of course, this biographical approach can, if taken too far, become mere gossip or speculation – witness the emphasis some critics place on, for example, Sylvia Plath's suicide, or the unknown addressee of Emily Dickinson's "Master" letters. Despite otherwise interesting and helpful comment on Niedecker's work, Butterick indulges in such sensationalism when discussing the "For Paul" poems: "the reader may begin to ask, after this and all the variants of 'For Paul', was Niedecker so starved of company – or a child of her own! – or the innocence of children – that Paul Zukofsky had such a dominant role in her imagination's life?" (229).

Butterick makes no attempt to back this up, but I have already mentioned Niedecker's brief affair with Zukofsky in the early thirties, her subsequent abortion and return to Wisconsin. Biographer Breslin notes: "No one seemed to know how

[Niedecker] felt about the pregnancy, except that she wanted to keep the child" (145). Knowng this can certainly colour our reaction to the "For Paul" poems. Indeed, "it is difficult," as one critic writes, "not to consider Niedecker's abortion in connection to her attachment to Zukofsky's child" (Sturgeon, 84). To read Niedecker's letters to Zukofsky is to discover the painful truth of this, for Niedecker invested much in her fragile bond with Paul Zukofsky. I have mentioned in chapter 4 that she often sent gifts of money, clothes (some handmade by herself) or books (including her own treasured Audobon) and once after receiving some photographs of the family Niedecker wrote back: "You two [Louis and Paul] togedder – I wear it on my heart – reminds a person of an early religious painting . . . My three pictures – my three children, I hug 'em" (Letter to Zukofsky, Dec. 1945, Austin). Such expressions can be embarrassing for the outside reader, and it is notable that in her edition of the correspondence Penberthy omits letters and passages in similar style. Zukofsky too may have been made uncomfortable by this tension. Certainly he criticized Niedecker's "For Paul" poems as sentimental, asked her to cut out all the personal references in the poems and became less than enthusiastic about the project as it progressed. Yet, Sturgeon has suggested that, "Ironically the 'For Paul' period in Niedecker's career (. . .) may be interpreted as her growth away from certain interactive aspects of her literary exchange with Zukofsky and toward her own maturation as an individual poet" (83). It is clear from letters to Zukofsky that the poems were, or became more important to Niedecker than their subject. Indeed, Niedecker may have used the "For Paul" project as a kind of cathartic working out of this emotional problem.

However, this experience may still have affected Niedecker, who spent most of her life unmarried and had no children. This may have been fortuitous for, as Tillie Olsen points out, most successful women writers are (even today) either unmarried or childless, and thus able to devote themselves more fully to their writing (16). For Niedecker, who also had to hold a job for most of her life, a family could have meant no time to write. Perhaps her choice of metaphor is significant when, after receiving a copy of *Origin* containing some of her work, she wrote, "The issue received – mother and child both doing fine I almost want to say!" (Letter to Corman, 15 Jun. 1966, *Between*, 86).

It is probably useless to speculate on how Niedecker felt about her early abortion (kept in silence for so long, and enacting a silencing of its own) and her subsequent childlessness (being an only child she was the last of her line) but she seems to have loved children. She was often in the company of those in the neighbourhood ("The kid next door started school and is gone from me all day," she wrote; Letter to Zukofsky, 8 Sep. 1951, *Correspondence*, 186), and when she married Al Millen in the sixties she gained his grandchildren by a previous marriage. Certainly regret seems to be the personal subtext of at least one poem ("I visit the graves" *Life*, 94).

Greatgrandfather
under wild flowers sons
sons here now I
    eye
of us all

but sonless
see no
        hop
clover boy to stop
before me

The poem "You are my friend" (*Life*, 36) appears to have a similar subtext to "If only my friend", discussed in the last chapter. Here the friend brings gifts for the speaker and performs small services (such as carrying the fishpole) as well as helping out with tasks the speaker might be reluctant (watering the worms?) or unable (patching the boot) to do for herself. This proof of the friendship means that there is less fear of losing or being rejected by the friend – this speaker is confident enough to assert, "You are my friend". (However, in an earlier version the line read, "Why do I press it: are you my friend?"; *From This Condensery*, 316). Yet, as the subtext of the poem emerges we realize that this could be bitter irony, for the final lines of the poem ("nothing in it/ but my hand") suggest that while the relationship is only friendship (there's "nothing in it" to make us think otherwise), the speaker wishes it was something more. The "hand" could be her hand in marriage, if the man wanted it, but he will only be a "friend". Hence the opening line implies far more than we may first have thought – longing, disappointment, regret. The same dilemma is stated more openly in "The men leave the car" (*Life*, 87),

where the speaker "grieves" because her friend has given a "clear" statement of his intent – "No marriage/ no marriage/ friend".

There is a more personal layer of subtext to these poems: they refer obliquely to Niedecker's relationship with Milwaukee dentist Harold Hein. Niedecker hoped to marry Hein who seemed a perfect companion for her, sensitive, literary and artistic, but he was determined not to marry again after losing his first wife through illness, and although he even took Niedecker to visit his family (see "Come In" *Collected*, 179), he would be no more than a friend to her. Several poems seem to be inspired by Hein (for example, "The men leave the car", see Letter to Zukofsky, 2 Jul. 1961, *Correspondence*, 282) and she described one – "In Leonardo's light" (*Life*, 86) – as "closest to a love poem I ever writ" (Letter to Zukofsky, 22 Aug. 1960, *Correspondence*, 265), but she was uncertain about using her life for poetry in this way. As mentioned in chapter 6, the early version of "You are my friend" had a third stanza, making more explicit reference to Hein – "your dentist fingers" (*Condensery*, 317). Niedecker later cut this: "it shore bothers *me* now, dead weight of that third stanza," explaining, "Sometimes I can be so blind especially on something directly out of life. There's a pitfall for poets – directly out of life" (Letter to Zukofsky, 18 Dec. 1960, *Correspondence*, 271)[1].

The late poem "I married" (*Pail*, 93) also seems to have biographical connections and I suggested in the chapter 5 that it dealt with Niedecker's late marriage to Al Millen. Yet again Niedecker was uneasy about using her personal experience, for she wrote to Corman that she had written the poem, "Just a few moments ago from a folk conversation and I suppose some of my own dark forebodings. We shd. try to be true to our subconscious? Sorry it is another *I* poem. My god, I must try to get away from that" (Letter to Corman, 20 Jul. 1967, *Between*, 129). "Another *I* poem" could simply indicate the use of the personal pronoun, but from the rest of the description it seems that this particular poem did have a personal background. But Niedecker wrote many poems describing her life with her parents and grandparents (even darker patches, like her father's affair and her mother's death), and had no qualms about those. Is it then the *subject* of this poem that caused such anxiety? Perhaps she felt that putting her personal problems into poetry would lower its quality, recalling my previous discussion of

"suitable" subjects for poetry – while certain kinds of biography and personal reminiscence might be considered acceptable, others would not, especially those connected with such sensitive, gender-orientated subjects. Niedecker seems to feel that she has transgressed here and perhaps fears (male) disapproval. However, it is ironic that we would not have known the biographical subtext of this poem had Niedecker not drawn attention to it.

I would now like to leave the unspoken as biographical subtext and look at the unspoken as omission. As we have seen in previous chapters, Niedecker enjoyed biographies and edited correspondences and used information gathered from these in her poems. Penberthy notes that, "Niedecker's avid reading of the collected letters of other writers . . . provided her with a further source for poems" ("Vertical," 979) and one correspondent described her enthusiasm for such reading (and writing): "the delightful deshabille style, talking to someone, not just talking" (Cox quoted by Niedecker, Letter to Corman, 15 May 1969, *Between*, 191). Niedecker herself remarked to Cox, "how I love the letters of big people" (Letter to Cox, 2 May 1969, "Extracts," 37). From a gender point of view feminist criticism has noted, "the attraction of woman writers to personal forms of expression like letters, autobiographies, confessional poetry, diaries and journals" (Gubar, 299), although there was also a strong precedent for Niedecker in the work of male poets like Pound and Zukofsky who quoted from letters and personal papers.

Despite the opinions of some critics who see these works as "overly learned, overtly leaning on [their] sources" (Butterick, 233) or "marginalia to . . . prose biographies" (Davie, "Niedecker," 206), Niedecker is not so obscure and recondite in her poetry as, say, Pound or Eliot (she once remarked of Zukofsky's work "it's all affirmative and not stuck in a waste land with the TSEs" Letter to Zukofsky, 7 Mar. 1953, *Correspondence*, 212) and in most cases (though not all, as with "The Ballad of Basil" *Harpsichord*, 23) the reader can understand and appreciate quotations or specialized information in the context of the poem without requiring any prior or wide knowledge of the subject. (Nevertheless, a little research into the subject will reward a reader with a deeper understanding of such works). Perhaps this is partly owing to what

Niedecker prefers to include in (or exclude from) the poems, for she concentrates not on famous or historical deeds but the unspoken, personal details. She explained her interest in the personal side of these famous people, and her delight in reading about them:

> I'm absorbed in writing poems – sequence – on William Morris. I know how to evaluate – Ruskin etc., their kind of socialism – paternalism – but the letters of Morris have thrown me . . . I can't read his poems. I'd probably weary of all those flowery designs in carpets, wall papers, chintzes . . . but as a man, as a poet speaking to his daughters and his wife – o lovely. (Letter to Corman, 7 May 1969, *Between*, 188)

Thus Niedecker used the unspoken parts of these people's lives, and left unspoken things we may already know.

"Active literary omission" is a phrase often used to describe practice such as Niedecker's, for as Marianne Moore points out, "Omissions are not accidents" (*Poems*, author's note). What a poem omits may be equally significant, and equally part of our understanding of the poem, as what is actually included. Thus Macherey: "What is important about a work is what it does not say" (87). For example, "Who was Mary Shelley?" (*Life*, 57) is based on Niedecker's reading (although it does not quote or parphrase a source) and it is remarkable for what it does not say. The "incomplete" nature of the poem, its many loose ends, serve to demonstrate the importance of the unspoken, for much has been left out of Mary Shelley's life, as described in the poem and in literary history. "There is," writes one woman critic, "considerable irony present in [Niedecker's] treatment of certain famous women-among-men" (Clausen, "Niedecker," 11). Here the irony is largely implied by what is unspoken and it forms a further layer of subtext to the poem.

I have already shown in chapter 5 that Niedecker uses this poem to question the non-identity and anonymity of women, who, once married, are defined by their husbands – Mary was not merely the wife of a famous poet, but a woman writer with an intensely literary background. The use of question form here draws attention to these omissions and also gives a sense of Niedecker's own thoughts about her subject, specifically her curiosity concerning the person behind the famous name. It is interesting that though in a letter about her reading on the Shelleys (Letter to Zukofsky, 19 Sep. 1962, *Correspondence*, 320) Niedecker places more emphasis on Percy, it was Mary's

biography she was reading and Mary she chose to write about. The poem has become one of her most acclaimed, reclaimed "feminist" works. As suggested in chapter 5, there may be a personal relevance to this poem also, in that Niedecker could have chosen Mary Shelley because she felt some affinity with her.

"The use of quotation is becoming a fine art with certain poets," commented Niedecker at one point, apparently with derogotary overtones (Letter to Williams, 9 Mar. 1965, Jargon), yet she herself had used quotation in her poems up to this time, and a few years later was to compose the long poem sequences "Thomas Jefferson", "Darwin" and "His Carpets Flowered", which rely heavily on base texts. Perhaps she was just warning against excess, since she once wrote, "the hard part is to keep some quotes but not too many" (Letter to Cox, 2 Feb. 1970, "Extracts," 40). As I have already implied, these poems have been variously received by critics, some deriding them as derivative, marginal and inferior, others claiming them as Niedecker's best work. Few however, have taken the time to look closely at Niedecker's methods of composition. Obviously, this was a new thing for Niedecker, who worried about developing longer, more reflective forms, but these collage sequences are not entirely unrelated to her previous work. In fact, their development can be traced in earlier projects, and her concerns and themes are common to much of her work.

The most obvious example is the group of "For Paul" poems, which were mostly made up of anecdotes from Zukofsky's letters to Niedecker about Paul Zukofsky's antics as a young child. "These letters became the source of the poems for Paul in two senses:" writes Penberthy, "they gave her not only an engaging subject but a written text to quote from, to allude to, and to paraphrase" (*Correspondence*, 58). Although, as I have mentioned in chapter 3, at one point she had hoped to publish the group as a collection, in the end Niedecker selected very few of these poems for publication, perhaps because of the tangled personal problems associated with them. Consequently, critics unacquainted with the material have missed the connections between this earlier project and the later collage sequences. These connections lie not only in the use of personal writing as base texts, but in the selection process and methods of structuring the poems.

Penberthy says of an unpublished "For Paul" poem, "Understand me, dead is nothing" (*Condensery*, 49) that Niedecker "has suppressed all logical connectives between the quoted segments allowing for a variety of alternative contacts between the components of the poem, for a more circular, exploratory reading" (*Correspondence*, 60). It is interesting to compare this appraisal with critical descriptions of Niedecker's later sequence method: "a collage of quotations and references with no overt explanation linking the selections" (Breslin, 148); "[Niedecker] leaves open many possiblities of connection, creating space for the reader to act imaginatively on the fragments" (Breslin, 149); "The later poems place more trust in statement but keep open the routes to the subconscious by leaving interconnexions weak and withholding points implied" (Cox, "Longer," 396). Here, the unspoken connections are filled in by the reader. We must also bear in mind Niedecker's interest in the unconscious and subconscious mind and the influence of surrealism, although these collages are not so disconnected and nonsensical as Niedecker's surrealist work of the thirties. In fact, at around the same time as Niedecker was working on the collage portraits, her interest in surrealism was again ignited, and her final collection, *Harpsichord & Salt Fish* includes both surrealist and collage poems.

Despite the fact that it is the unconscious mind of the reader that creates them as a whole, the role of active consciousness in composing the late collage sequences might seem important, since Niedecker selected certain materials for inclusion and omitted others. However, by her own admission, Niedecker engaged with the sub- or unconscious in selection as well. She remarked, "My Thomas Jefferson written and sent out. Up very early mornings – nearly killed myself – and all that reading beforehand (until I realized? what am I doing? – writing a biography or history?? no, all I could do is fill the subconscious and fish up later)" (Letter to Cox, 2 Feb. 1970, "Extracts," 40). Thus, although (as Penberthy has said of the "For Paul" poems) "the quotations retain an objective, factual status" and "they secure the poem in a palpable present [or a palpable past]," it is certainly true that, "they also serve as cues for reflective, vertical thinking" (*Correspondence*, 62). Niedecker, commenting more generally on other poetry, shed further light on her choice of this method, "Montage, yes, it suggests the reality that may

get inside us and fill the subconscious of the future! Several referential planes at any one moment?" (Letter to Corman, 7 Dec. 1969, *Between*, 207).

However, there is more to the unspoken in these poems than the difficult and inarticulate realms of the unconscious mind. Any reader interested enough to seek the sources for the poems will soon realize that there is something odd going on. At first sight it may seem that Niedecker is once again proving her identification with male figures and artists, paying homage to great men in her role as admiring female inferior, but Breslin for one, has suggested that Niedecker is doing much more than this.

> She is an active, not a passive reader of their texts, selecting, arranging, and condensing . . . Drawing on the private writings of these men, she catches them out of the formal dress of public discourse, exposing their doubts, unhappiness, yearnings, and affections. She takes liberties with them . . . She even goes so far as to alter their words in quotations without indicating that she has done so . . . (149)

Thus even in her choice of the private over the public, Niedecker can be seen to subvert the very greatness of these figures, proving them no more, no less than human beings. Indeed, she also asserts her own superior authority by her treatment of them in her poems.

It is interesting to digress slightly here and look again at the Niedecker-Zukofsky relationship. Sometime in 1965 Niedecker revealed to correspondents that she was editing Zukofsky's letters to her for publication. In the end Zukofsky refused permission to publish the manuscript but some of the comments Niedecker makes about her methods and aims for this project are revealing and relevant to her collage sequences. "I'm editing the letters to me of LZ – thirty years of 'em, in, I think, a special way," Niedecker wrote (Letter to Williams, 22 Aug. 1965, Jargon), emphasizing the orginality of her method, not the "special" qualities of Zukofsky's letters. A letter to Corman is even more significant, with Niedecker asserting her ability to display, "just the essences, tincture of Z!, a drop to a page, that constant, deep-in spot in his being" and again she highlights her own innovative approach, "It will not be letters in the ordinary sense" (Letter to Corman, postmarked 6/8/65, *Between*, 59). As with the late portrait sequences Niedecker's model was collage and her cutting and splicing of Zukofsky's letters is evident – and frustrating – to researchers studying the manuscript holdings in the

Zukofsky collection at Austin. Again, Niedecker selected only small parts from a large body of original material (a few years earlier she had written to Zukofsky himself, "my aim was to save those parts that are so good I couldn't bear to discard 'em" Letter to Zukofsky, 13 Feb. 1961, *Correspondence,* 276), and again she relies on the reader to create a working whole – "His double talk, triple, multiple, might get across, of course, if readers are keen enough" (Letter to Corman, postmarked 8/6/65, *Between*, 59).

Thus Breslin's conclusion that in taking on this project Niedecker "was gratifying herself as much as she was honoring [Zukofsky]" (146) is certainly valid in some sense. Perhaps in this assertion of her own ability to re-create her picture of Zukofsky, Niedecker managed to rid herself of much that had dogged their relationship. Similarly, the collage sequences may have, as Breslin suggests, "been motivated by her desire to master through writing her connection to men she admired, to carve out a place for herself and assert her right to authorship in the patriarchal culture they represented" (150).

Further, as with the Mary Shelley poem, Niedecker's choice of these men may have been influenced by personal affinities. In chapter 2, I mentioned Walsh's suggestion that Niedecker sympathized with Jefferson's love of his home estate Monticello because of her strong attachment to her own home-place. Many affinities could have operated in the case of Darwin, the most obvious being an interest in the workings of nature and the environment, and the connections between all living things. Walsh puts forward some less apparent likenesses:

> That [Niedecker] was sensitive to his enormous struggles against poor health and climate is evidenced in the sections she quoted from his journals and diaries in the poem . . . Darwin was trying to make sense of a lifetime of research, synthesizing far-flung discoveries into a coherent whole. A process which Niedecker parallels in condensing her poetry. (41)

Breslin too is aware of this aspect, and describes the figures Niedecker chose as "experimenters, like herself, subverters of fixed ideas and repressive systems" (148), though as I will show this is not always entirely true. This in itself can be read as subversion on Niedecker's part, for although these poems apparently take as their subject the life of some famous figure, Niedecker in fact uses them to reflect her own interests

and concerns, so that they are equally as expressive of her own personality and experience. "How much of each poem is her, how much her subject, is impossible to say. Their voices merge," remarks one critic (Cox, "Longer," 400). This may be one reason for Gunn's appraisal of the collage method used by Niedecker: "Others have used it, but they always sound too much like Pound . . . Only Niedecker, that I know of, recomposes her scraps into such fresh portraits" (25).

I will now go on to show in more detail how Niedecker subverts the set image of a famous figure – Thomas Jefferson – not only by showing his personal life and private concerns, but in demonstrating the contradictions inherent in the personality she depicts in her "Thomas Jefferson". One part (the sequence consists of poems of varying lengths, numbered I-XIX) raising questions on this score is III (*Pail*, 95), which refers to the British general Cornwallis during the War of Independence, and to Jefferson's support of the emancipation of slaves. Left unspoken, though Niedecker must have been aware of it, is the fact that Jefferson himself owned many slaves who worked his estates. Did Niedecker choose to ignore this contradiction, or has she included this incident precisely in order to highlight it (by means of the unspoken)? It is difficult to say, but a clue may lie in the source of the poem. "Elk Hill" was in fact a plantation belonging to Jefferson, and the thirty slaves abducted by Cornwallis were therefore his property[2]. Hence, the poem sequence works on two levels depending on the reader; someone with extra knowledge of Jefferson (apart from that given in the sequence) would be aware of this, while another could remain ignorant of the ambivalence.

Pursuing this idea, part XII (*Pail*, 98) could point up the same contradiction. This poem seems to portray Jefferson as looking forward to his retirement so that he can spend time with his family, sharing even their homely domestic tasks – "We shall sow our cabbages/ together". Yet members of the family would direct the work to be done – actual planting and tending of crops would have been carried out by slaves. This paradox surfaces in Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia", where he proposes the theory that blacks are racially inferior to whites "in the endowments both of body and mind", adding that "this unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful

obstacle to the emancipation of these people" (192-3), while suggesting elsewhere that "the minds of our citizens may be ripening for the emancipation of human nature" (28).

The image of Jefferson as a family man is emphasized throughout the poem, with references to his daughters, Martha and Mary. Yet the letters Niedecker quotes or paraphrases might suggest rather different unspoken and underlying ideas. Part VI (*Pail*, 96) combines at least two letters to Martha on the subject of her education[3]. In Niedecker's poem Jefferson directs his daughter towards his own interest in the classics – "read Livy" and "Science also" – as well as "music, history/ dancing". This could be taken as a parent's natural concern for a child's education, or alternatively as a rather harsh regime for a young daughter. Another reading, given Niedecker's insertion of the parenthesis, "I calculate 14 to 1/ in marriage/ she will draw/ a blockhead", could be that Jefferson wishes to educate his daughters enough for them to attract eligible, intelligent husbands. Again, this could be read as parental concern, or as a disparaging comment on his daughter's judgement. Niedecker gives no clue as to how the reader might interpret these remarks, and also leaves unspoken the fact that Martha was Jefferson's favourite daughter, one of two children to survive infancy and the only one to survive him – the grandchildren "Anne and Ellen" mentioned in XIX are her daughters.

Part X (*Pail*, 98) shows more clearly a dissonance between the image of Jefferson as a caring family man, and what he wrote to his daughters. It refers to a letter from Jefferson to Mary:

> I find I have counted too much on you as a Botanical and zoological correspondent: for I undertook to affirm here that the fruit was not killed in Virginia, because I had a young daughter there who was in that kind of correspondence with me, and who I was sure would have mentioned it if it had been so. (Letter, "To Mary Jefferson", 1 May 1791, *Papers* vol. 20, 335).

Niedecker contrasts the severe tone with the pet name "Polly", and demonstrates how big an issue Jefferson makes out of this lapse by the use of the upper case N ("I said No") and the words "shrink" and "retract", implying his shame and his fear at having to say he was wrong. Of course, the obvious subtext of this poem is that Jefferson is clearly *not* "in that kind/ of correspondence" with his daughter. Also present, but left unspoken, are several other facts which add to the underlying tension. Mary usually did mention the

fruit and vegetables in her letters (for example, in the letter c.11 Aug. 1790, *Papers* vol 17, 333). However, she seems to have been a bad correspondent, or at least not up to Jefferson's standards, and he frequently reprimanded her on this score. Of course, it was he who actually told people about the strawberries; she only omitted mention of it. Finally, Mary was only twelve years old at this time – rather young to be enthusiastic about writing long letters on the estate's fruit and vegetables (again Jefferson directs his daughters along the lines of his own interests). This poem seems to be less than complimentary about Jefferson as a father, and highlights once more the personal contradictions of this famous figure.

Breslin has noted that Niedecker's treatment "undercuts the notion of the unitary self, implying instead that identity is mutiple and fluid" (149). In this way Niedecker subverts not only the specific image we might have of Jefferson, but also a tradition of biography that puts forward the person concerned as a "unified" image. A complex pattern of not-spoken emerges here: histories or biographies may generally omit the contradictions that do not fit their picture of a famous figure; Niedecker, by her manipulation of both text and unspoken material draws the reader's attention to just these contradictions. This is not to say, of course, that Niedecker consciously selected her material to produce these subversive undercurrents – indeed, we have seen how she relied on subconscious processes of selection. During her reading and research for the Jefferson poem, she may have sensed these tensions, for she wrote, "reading about all I can get on Thomas Jefferson – may be John Adams is my man" (Letter to Corman, 28 Aug. 1969, *Between*, 198), perhaps feeling that Adams was less complex and paradoxical. However, despite this, and although she wrote shorter poems about Adams, she went ahead with the long sequence on Jefferson, with all its ambivalences. Yet she may not have been aware of the extent of subversion present in her poems and Cox relates how in one letter to him Niedecker remarked of Pound's Canto XXI that he used "some things about Jefferson that were unjust and simply *smart*" (Letter to Cox, 30 Jun. 1970, quoted in Cox, "Longer," 400)

"It seems useful and legitimate," states Macherey, "to ask of every production what it tacitly implies, what it does not say" (85), and this is certainly true of Niedecker's

poetic productions, where omissions can be as important as inclusions. As with condensation, use of the unspoken means that there may be far more to a Niedecker poem than the few words and lines it comprises. Obviously, however, if we are not alert to the possiblity that they are there, we can overlook the hidden meanings these omissions point to, as many critics have done, consciously or otherwise. Thus Niedecker can be read on a surface level, as simplistic, or as paying homage to "great" men; alternatively, she can be read as encoding the subversive in what she does not say, using the unspoken to challenge what is said, how we say it, and how we interpret it.

> You see here
> the influence
> of inference (*Collected*, 268)

III. "Such a thing as silence": Silence as an integral part of Niedecker's poetics.

8. FORM: "a proper/ balance/ of water, air/ and poetry".

Kammer may be stating the obvious when she remarks, "what strikes us first before anything else about a poem is its shape upon the page" (159) but a poem's shape is as much made up of space as of words. As early as 1934 Niedecker stated, "I should like a poem to be seen as well as read" (Letter to Harriet Monroe, 12 Feb. 1934, quoted in *Correspondence*, 25) and more than thirty years later she wrote, "If I close my eyes I look for the word on the page" (Letter to Corman, 3 May 1967, *Between*, 121). "Any poem printed on the page in lines that are not justified at both margins shows a typographic format which can be analyzed as a visual organization of space" (Cushman, 65) and Niedecker's poetic forms are striking partly because of their incorporation of space, the blank page. One critic has gone so far as to claim that her "easily overlooked art in fact surpassed the sophistication of the work of more acclaimed poets by the strength of its forms" (Kilroy, 120). These forms were, like all else in Niedecker's work, the product of much practice and perfecting: Roub remarks how Niedecker wished to use not only "the fewest words possible" and "the best of the fewest words" but also "the best possible arrangement, . . . the most appropriate arrangement on the page" (39).

It may not be going too far to suggest that one reason for Niedecker's attention to space may have been her involvement with place. "The American condition," Robert Creeley has commented, "has much to do with *place*, an active spatial term which differs in that way from . . . its European equivalent" (260-61). In fact one Niedecker critic has said, "it was the pressure of vast provincial American space that brought the content of her highly individual style to bea r. . . The space of an environment, . . . stands at the back of Miss Niedecker's terse formulations" (Tomlinson, 7).

Niedecker wished her poems printed one to a page, to maximize the effect of words and space: unfortunately, for reasons of economy, publishers have rarely printed them in this way. One exception is *The Granite Pail*, edited by Corman, and to see the poems like this is to apprehend more fully their forms of words and space. The use of

space is especially noticeable in shorter poems where blank space takes up far more of the page than actual words. "For [Niedecker]," comments Roub, "the visual experience of the words is almost as important as the music and the thought" (39-40).

When copying either her own or others' work Niedecker was always very conscious of spacing on the page. She once sent some of Corman's poetry to Morgan Gibson, explaining, "I think I've allowed enough space between the lines. I've used two spaces elsewhere and three here. Cid has plenty of space between those lines in his book . . . My way is probably OK" (Letter to Gibson, 15 Nov. 1965, *Truck*). It is clear from Niedecker's correspondence with Williams during the publication of *T&G* that she was concerned that her poems should be presented correctly in terms of spacing. On receiving proofs she wrote to Williams about the "headings" (sub-titles) of some poems, "Main thing is to have these headings far enough up from the body of the poem" (Letter to Williams, 12 Mar. 1968, Jargon) and a year later she was still complaining about positioning on the page: "Spaces separating the units within poems – not wide enough and in some cases, almost indistinguishable . . . The spaces – this bothers me most, affects almost every poem" (Letter to Williams, 26 Feb. 1969, Jargon). Once the book was out she concluded, "Spacing within the poems drives me crazy – they'll never get reprinted correctly if anyone wants them" (Letter to Williams, 24 Sep. 1969, Jargon), and certainly every edition of Niedecker's work seems to vary the size of characters used and line spacing, so that poems look widely different in different editions.

Yet the spaces of a poem are more than just visually effective; in a discussion of Carlos Williams' work one critic remarks that, "*Paterson*'s blank space is often articulate" (Nelson, 201), explaining, "space, words and puncutation are dramatic events in the poem. They sustain the page as a field of force" (202). Similarly, Denise Levertov has stated that, "every space and comma is a living part of the poem and has its function . . . And the way lines are broken is a functioning part essential to the poem's life" (3). So the poet's skill must lie as much in manipulating the spaces or silences between the words as in the words themselves, for it is in the placing of those words on the blank page, and in the spaces between and around them that the poem comes to life and form, and our experience of the poem assimilates both words and spaces.

Niedecker's short one-stanza poems seem to be free of form but other short poems are made up of irregular stanzas or line-groups, from early poems like "They came at a pace" (*Collected*, 160), through "A student" (*Life*, 54), "In the great snowfall before the bomb" (*Life*, 61), "Horse, hello" (*Life*, 69), and "Club 26" (*Life*, 85), to parts of "Lake Superior" (*Life*, 105), "Consider" (*Harpsichord*, 25), "Wilderness" (*Harpsichord*, 24) and "Foreclosure" (*Pail*, 104), to name just a few examples. Others are simply blocks, though these are fewer in number and seem to be mostly earlier works such as "The museum man!" (*Life*, 28) or "The clothesline post is set" (*Life*, 32). Short poems can use space and silence to great effect, with line-breaks, typography, indentation, and internal spaces (gaps) often incorporated as part of the structure. Longer forms (though not necessarily sequences) tend to be fixed, earlier poems generally more so owing to a metric and rhyming structure as well as regular stanzas (but stanza forms vary widely from poem to poem), while the longer poems of Niedecker's late career are fixed by stanzas alone, and because of this and their greater length and scope seem "looser". Of course, it is clear that in poems without metrical or rhyming schemes the patterns of words and spaces will be of increased importance.

I will look first at some shorter poems, in order to determine how Niedecker uses space within their forms. Every poet uses space to the extent that the lines are broken. Thus the poet chooses how much space to leave at the end of each line and the right margin of the poem is generally ragged. Line-breaks can be very important, contributing to the poem as a whole in various ways, for the space after the words stop acts as a pause, a silence, until we move on and down to the next line. In this way the line-breaks of a poem split up its words into blocks or groups, and the grouping of these words together, isolated by the space on either side, produces a particular effect on the reader.

I have already quoted in chapter 5 a striking instance of line breaking, in the poem "Who was Mary Shelley?" (*Life*, 57).

She bore a child

Who died
and yet another child
who died

Both the stanza form and the line-breaks mean that the reader gets incomplete information – Mary had "a child", but the next line ends any hope or speculation on this point, stating bluntly that the child "died". The following lines repeat the same process, the break between the two pieces of information being less, but after the first time our shock is correspondingly less. The spaces also enact the erasure of the children's lives: where once their future stretched out before them, now it is cut short by death.

The above poem also demonstrates another technique Niedecker uses: repetition, or rather repetition with variation. For example, the poem beginning "I knew a clean man/ but he was not for me" (*Life*, 58) ends "He's/ the one for me." The first stanza breaks a new sentence after the first word "He", leaving it hanging until we pick up the sentence in the second stanza which runs on to the final statement, "He's/ the one for me", a positive repetition of the poem's beginning. Ending the first stanza here has two effects – it creates an ambiguity since we assume that "He" is the the same "he" who has been rejected in the second line; and it places the second "He" directly above the "He" of "He's/ the one for me" in the third line of the second stanza. (This could mean that these two "He"s are grouped together and are separate from the first "he" which occurs very close to the left margin).

The first part of "Lake Superior" (*Life*, 105) also employs this device:

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

In blood the minerals
of the rock

The shape of these lines against the white space around them emphasizes that the second stanza is a copy of the first, but reduced in scale. Looking at the words themselves this is also true: the first stanza is a general inclusive statement, while the second backs up the first with a specific example.

Line-breaks can cause ambiguities, like the one I have just pointed out in "I knew a clean man". I have mentioned in chapter 6 the case of "floods" in "Along the river" – the line-breaks isolate this word so that we cannot tell if it is a noun in a list or a verb to go with the preceding "air" (though of course, this is also due to a lack of punctuation).

Likewise in another poem also discussed in chapter 6, "So he said on radio", the line-breaks emphasize the disjointed syntax and the sense is difficult to follow since the thread of meaning is continually broken. Niedecker often used line-breaks in this way, to create, aid or highlight ambiguity, multiple meanings or syntactic oddities. It is interesting to note here that Niedecker's early surrealist poems, which are almost wholly made up of syntactic oddities and non-sense, employ seemingly erratic or random (but very striking) line-breaks, gaps and indentations.

In his influential essay "Projective Verse", Charles Olson borrowed a phrase from his friend and fellow poet Robert Creeley – "Form is never more than a revelation of content" (16). If we take "content" as meaning or sense then, as I have shown above, this is not always true of Niedecker, but taking "content" as the whole poem (and Niedecker's syntactic disjunctions are often integral to the poem), it seems a fair observation on form. Indeed, as already stated, the spaces of the poem are as relevant, as articulate as its words – they are capable of "revealing" the poem to its reader.

Use of space to reflect the "meaning" or "point" of a poem can be very obvious, as in "March" (*Life*, 62):

Bird feeder's
        snow-cap
              sliding
                    off

Stretching the imagination only a little, the final tiny "off" surrounded by white space could be the cap of the feeder lying on the (possibly snow-covered) ground. In any case, the increasingly indented lines give a visual picture of what the words describe, sliding off to the right and down. Thus here and elsewhere Niedecker uses spacing to give what Stephen Cushman describes as "mimetic representations of visible phenomena in the world" (72). However, Cushman also points out that, "The problem with mimetic meaning is that we can easily make too much of it" (36). That is, as readers we might begin seeing visual implications in the spacing of a poem on the page where this is unwarranted.

On the other hand, a writer may also "make too much" of mimetic spacing – I am thinking here especially of "concrete" poetry, which enjoyed international popularity

among poets during the sixties. Here, the words form a "picture" in a very obvious way, and generally the form of the poem, the way the words are placed on the page, takes precedence over the meaning or other qualities of the words themselves. Although Niedecker was deeply concerned with form, she sought a balance (as my epigraph for this chapter from "Nursery Rhyme" *Pail*, 101 implies) of form, meaning and music. Yet she could also see advantages in experimenting with concrete poetry, and she commented perceptively on Ian Hamilton Finlay's involvement with concrete: "Ian – well, I think Concrete is better experience for the writer than for the reader" (Letter to Gibson, 12 Aug. 1966, *Truck*).

Similar mimetic effects to that in "March" are achieved in many Niedecker poems, but this kind of gradual indenting is used frequently, even when it does not necessarily illustrate the meaning of the poem, for example in "Easter" (*Life*, 81). Later in this chapter I will discuss "Wintergreen Ridge" (*Life*, 118), where Niedecker adopts a stepped stanza form in which indentation will obviously not function primarily as a visual effect to give point to the words. In "Dusk" (*Life*, 82) the indentation is more random, appearing in the last three lines of this six line (or, if we count blank lines, as perhaps we should, eight line) poem. Here the indented lines could represent either the slipperiness of man, as they slip across the page, or the movement of the "small fish" darting here and there. "Two old men" (*Life*, 62) has its last two lines equally indented. These final lines are the "punchline" and setting them off by themselves emphasizes that the whole poem turns on the contrasting personalities and habits of the two friends: "you spit/ I don't spit".

Another aspect of this assymetrical typography is internal spacing or gaps. One critic has said of Virginia Woolf's writing that her:

> . . . association of space with silence suggests that she approached the subject of form in the way that painters, composers, and architects do, using "blank" or "negative" spaces in a positive way, making them part of a style of alternating rhythm that is thematic and visual as well as musical, deconstructing the oppositional elements of time and space. . . (Laurence, 12)

This will surely be heightened in poetry and Niedecker's "The eye/ of the leaf" (*Life*, 112) uses internal spacing to making a visual connection and to highlight a thematic

connection, both in the poem and with others of the same group. One critic observed that the "design" of this poem is "more intricate than it seems at a first reading" (Yates, 241).

The eye
of the leaf
into leaf
and all parts
      spine
into spine
neverending
      head
to see

The placing of the first "spine" directly above the second, and "head" two lines directly below connects these words, aligned as they are into a small block of their own. On a smaller scale, the removal of the hyphen between "never" and "ending", giving "neverending" mirrors the meaning of the new compound word.

With spaces, however, the opposite effect is more often achieved – not connection but isolation. Part IX of "Thomas Jefferson" (*Pail*, 97) describes Jefferson during his term in France, the last lines running thus:

He could be trimmed
by a two-month migrane

and yet
          stand up

The isolation of these final words produces several impressions: because the words stand out in the space surrounding them our attention is drawn to them, while mimetically they could image Jefferson standing alone and independent despite his illness. Yet the disjunction between this and the preceding line could also illustrate a faltering, or the effort required to reach a standing position. Indeed the fact that these are the last words of the poem might imply that standing up is as much as Jefferson can manage – to do more (fill the space or silence with speech or movement) would be too much for him.

Niedecker can also produce more subtle effects through internal spacing, as in "How white the gulls" (*Life*, 75).

How white the gulls
in grey weather
            Soon April
            the little

yellows

Here the spacing literally moves the reader on from dull winter to April and the promise of spring flowers. By aligning "yellows" with the first lines against the left margin, Niedecker connects the colour elements in the poem ("white", "grey" and "yellows" are thus all to the left of the poem). She also manages to give an impression of the emerging flowers peeping out here and there, because although "yellows" is aligned with margin, the effect of having the two preceding lines aligned together in the middle of the page, and the space between these two lines and "yellows" makes its placing seem random.

One of Niedecker's best known poems, "There's a better shine" (*Collected*, 158), uses a mixture of spacing and typography to great effect.

There's a better shine
on the pendulum
than is on my hair
and many times
    . .   . .
I've seen it there

The word "times" (connecting back with "pendulum") prompts a pause or gap, a whole blank line, while the speaker looks at the clock, then come the two sets of two dots[1] resembling the tick-tock, tick-tock of the swinging pendulum, before the final ambiguous statement, "I've seen it there" (is the shine the speaker refers to here the shine on the pendulum or on her hair?).

We find both indentation and internal spacing together in the poem "To My Pressure Pump" (*Life*, 90):

I've been free
      with less
         and clean
I plumbed for principles

Now I'm jet-bound
by faucet   shower
heater   valve
ring seal   service

cost to my little
   humming
         water
              bird

In the first stanza both line-breaks and indentation serve to emphasize the words of each line. One Niedecker critic describes her as using "the sentence as the unit of composition and not necessarily the single line" (Bertholf, "Niedecker," 228). "The straddling of lines by sentences dramatizes the 'larger processes of the imagination' as the poem disguises and reveals connection between words and objects," remarks Cushman (17), later commenting that, "The short-line poem is in a state of constant enjambement" (22). Thus we understand that "I've been free" can either mean simply that the speaker was previously less tied to material comforts, or that she could be more generous ("free") "with less", that is, when she wasn't paying for her plumbed water she could afford to use as much as she wished. The speaker also points out that she could keep "clean" "with less". However, the indented lines are not as important (to our understanding of the poem) as those aligned to the left – the former "freedom" of the speaker is significant, as is the fact that the only "plumbing" she did before was "for principles".

The internal spacing in the second stanza can serve as punctuation, so instead of separating the list by commas Niedecker uses gaps (I have denoted these by three spaces). One effect of this is that while each thing in the list is distinct from the others they follow on in a fluid stream. Looking closer at the pairings (two things to each line) we see that they can fit as pairs as well as all together: "faucet" and "shower" concern running water, "heater" and "valve" refer to the heating system, while "ring seal" and "service" have to do with mechanics and maintenance. However, the line-breaks can create ambiguities here, since we could easily read "shower/ heater" and "service/ cost" – both work equally well.

By placing "cost" at the beginning of the first line in the last stanza Niedecker ensures its impact: the new plumbing (the pump she addresses) has "cost" the speaker both literally and figuratively. The main effect of the indentation is to highlight the bird metaphor, each step or line bringing something new to the image – we are first told it is "little", then "humming" (presumably a mechanical sound), next "water" and finally, throwing both "humming" and "water" into a different context, "bird". (Obviously Niedecker changed her metaphor, for in a letter she described the pump as "a darling, jet, hums like a fan" Letter to Zukofsky, 19 Sep. 1962, *Correspondence*, 320).

Niedecker's concern with spacing was not confined to her poetry, as Faranda, editor of the letters to Corman, explains: "I have provided facsimiles of a few of the letters to demonstrate how close to poetry her letters often are. Her sense of rhythm and the interplay of sound and silence is evident in such simple devices as a seemingly idiosyncratic use of the space bar or margin set" (*Between*, 12). Looking at the original letters we can certainly see what Faranda is getting at, though Niedecker's concern with spacing is perhaps most obvious when she signs off. For example, one of the letters Faranda provides a facsimile of ends thus:

So – with more good wishes for your trip over

I yam

as ever
and the one baking squash
for dinner –
Lorine
(Letter to Corman, 5 Sep. 1970, *Between*, 235)

I have discussed in chapter 7 how Niedecker often incorporated quotes, sometimes from letters, in her poems, and clearly the role of space (especially line-breaks) is very important when turning a prose quotation into poetry. In a letter to Zukofsky, Niedecker explained:

I use your words and copy out thus:

I wrote another
longer, starting

Homage
Of love for, to
the young

but the pain's too much now,
for me to copy.

"It's a poem," she concluded, "but of course not the poem you are doing" (Letter to Zukofsky, 1 Feb. 1959, *Correspondence*, 248-9). Niedecker also employed apparently erratic spacing in her note-taking, as her letters again reveal.

Henry Miller has a book called Stand Still Like the Hummingbird!
Notes:
Interest –

An exchange
of two
  bird's notes
  !

(Letter to Zukofsky, 31 Dec. 1961, *Correspondence*, 296)

And in a letter to Corman, discussing the Japanese poet Kusano Shimpei, Niedecker commented:

I see I have jotted some notes that read like this:

Every spring
    frogs

(Letter to Corman, 2 Mar. 1967, *Between*, 114)

The same letter ends with a typically playful signing off:

Yours for a early
spring frog
          flood

Lorine

Moving from such random forms to fixed structures, earlier poems with these forms also frequently incorporate rhythm or metre and rhyme – one of the earliest known Niedecker poems "Wasted Energy" (*Collected*, 327) uses both end rhymes and an internal rhyme in addition to a regular stanzaic form. However, as we might expect, the strictness of both metrical and rhyming structures leaves small room for manipulation of space and indeed, the overall effect of rhythm and rhyme tends to preclude any such devices. Still, where structures use short and long lines, extra impact can be added by indenting the short lines, as in "What horror to awake at night" (*Life*, 48), which has a rather complicated (and not entirely regular) rhyme scheme. Another simple but effective use of indentation or spacing can be found in the early poem, "Jim Poor's his name" (*Collected*, 136). The point of this poem is made in the last line, indented to separate it from the rest of the poem (as with the punchline of "Two old men") and also outwith the rhyming structure. The poem shows the hard-headed realism of those who live in extreme poverty (if Jim's hair was worth even "a dime", "he'd sell it") and cannot afford to have a neatly ordered view of life.

Niedecker once wrote, "I wish I weren't so obsessed in my writing with form, a set form, sometimes it helps and then again it hinders," (Letter to Corman, 23 Jan. 1961, *Between*, 27) and in the longer poems "Paean to Place", "Wintergreen Ridge" and

"Darwin" she employed loose stanzas without metre or rhyme. Perhaps in this unfamiliar territory (away from the very short, highly-condensed poem), Niedecker felt a form of some kind would "help" but the rhyming and metrical forms she had used previously were rejected, perhaps as rigid and constricting, too much of a "hindrance". It is interesting to compare these long poems with "Lake Superior" and "Thomas Jefferson" which consist of parts or poems arranged in sequence – we recall Niedecker's description of a long poem as "made up of short ones" (Letter to Gibson, 6 Oct. 1966, *Truck*). It is also worth noting here that "Thomas Jefferson" differs from "Lake Superior" since the former comprises numbered parts arranged in more or less chronological order, while the latter is a more random assemblage. "Paean to Place" is somewhere between, employing stanzaic form but also being divided into numbered sections.

However interesting a full discussion of the several forms evident in Niedecker's work might be, what is at issue here is the role of space in these later stanza forms. "Wintergreen Ridge" (*Life*, 118) is composed in three line stanzas, stepped so that the first line is at the left margin, the second indented a number of spaces, the third indented twice that number; "Darwin" (*Pail*, 108) uses a four line stanza, stepped as "Wintergreen Ridge" but with the fourth line indented two spaces from the left margin; "Paean to Place" (*Life*, 14) employs varying five-line stanzas, the most recurrent having the first two lines on the left margin, then two lines equally stepped, and the final line again on the left margin.

Yet the use of regular stanzas is offset by Niedecker's irregular line lengths, which allow varying amounts of space into the stanzas and, with individual configurations or words and spaces, can make them look very different. This is in direct opposition to rhyme, where the emphasis is on sameness (words with the same sounds) and which demands a corresponding metrical structure. Lodge comments that, "The formal rules of poetry (i.e. verse) – metre, rhyme, stanzaic form etc. – are based upon relationships of *similarity* [his italics]" (88). However, Kammer, discussing Marianne Moore, describes a similar phenomenon to that noted in Niedecker's work: "regularity in the stanza form is constantly in tension with the irregularity of line length and the visual randomness of upper-case letters and punctuation" (162). Perhaps because of its less

complicated stanza form, "Wintergreen Ridge" displays less "visual randomness" than "Paean to Place" or "Darwin", but even two consecutive stanzas can look very different just because of the variation of line length and space surrounding the words.

> (wintergreen)
>   grass of parnassus
>   See beyond –
>
> ferns
>   algae
>   water lilies

"Paean to Place" is a slightly different case, as Niedecker employs more than one stanza throughout the poem, but in "Darwin" it is possible to miss the fact that the poem consists of regular stanzas. This is again undoubtedly owing to the considerable differences in line-length which exist between one stanza and another, and the fragmented appearance of the poem on the page. Compare for example, the opening stanza of part I:

> His holy
>   slowly
>   mulled over
>   matter

And the opening stanza of V:

> I remember, he said
>   those tropical nights at sea –
>   we sat and talked
>   on the booms

While it is clear that in using a fixed stanzaic form the poet cannot always manipulate words and spaces for special effects in certain places, the lack of metre in these poems allows Niedecker to break lines as she wishes, and on occasion these breaks can provide extra emphasis. Thus the sparse first stanza of "Darwin" I, quoted above, forces the reader to consider each word slowly and separately, to "mull over" the "matter" of the stanza, and this effect is heightened by alliteration of the long, rolling "l" sounds. Spacing and line-breaks are used to great effect later in I, with the stanza:

> 'Species are not
>   (it is like confessing
>   a murder)
>   immutable'

The indented parenthesis furthers the impression of an aside, while delaying the pronouncement, forming a kind of gap. Likewise, the simile of the aside is broken and we must wait for the next line to discover the force of the comparison. "Immutable" is beautifully placed – it seems to be against the left margin but is in fact indented by a small gap; like the "species" it is apparently fixed but is actually moving towards a new completion (of the line and of the stanza).

The first stanza of "Paean to Place" is as sparse as the introduction to "Darwin" but here the effect is different. Each of the three stepped lines (of one word each) reveals important elements of the speaker's environment, with the elements in the fourth line run together and both connecting with the water of "flood" above. All of these comprise the speaker's "life", aligned with the left margin for emphasis, which, we are told in the next line (second stanza) has been lived , like that of the "fish" and "fowl", "in the leaves and on water" (the leaves of the water lily? flood and mud?).

The final stanza of the poem makes equally effective use of space.

red Mars

rising
rides the sloughs and sluices
     of my mind
          with the persons
on the edge

"Red Mars" appears to have risen from the stanza below, as lines of roughly the same length, all aligned and all beginning with "r", form a column with a gap (the sky between star and horizon?). From "rising" to "rides" directly below, we embark on a journey, slipping further across and down the page with each indented line until we return, appropriately, to the left margin with "on the edge", finishing the thought, the stanza and the poem.

However, as well as looking at the effects on individual stanzas of space in fixed forms we must also examine the overall effect. The irregularity of line lengths gives these poems a much less rigid form, and this can be indicative of the poem's theme or subject. One critic has described "Paean to Place" as "seven spare pages dotted with tiny stanzas, suggesting [Niedecker's] wild wet landscape dotted with neat houses" (Bosley, 62),

while the much shorter "Paul/ when the leaves" employs a similar three-line stepped stanza to "Wintergreen Ridge" which seems here to reflect the motion of the falling leaves, twisting and turning but always moving downwards until they come to rest. This stanzaic form certainly aids the flow of the poem, the stepped lines keeping it moving along and down the page, and in the much longer "Wintergreen Ridge" the easily identifiable stanzas and this fluidity, impart a unity which "Paean to Place" and "Darwin", with their looser, less readily perceived forms lack. (Though certainly in the case of "Darwin", which is clearly meant as a montage, this "lack" is not in any way a defect).

Walsh describes "Wintergreen Ridge" as having a "circular form":

> . . . the overall effect being of a piece flowing in waves which reads like a scroll as it is unrolled. [Niedecker's] mind leaps to associations inspired by the ongoing natural development of the ridge; lines double back on themselves, reach out to pull in bits of human history, always pushing foward, unrolling thought. (27)

Such a form suits the subject, with the speaker apparently moving through a landscape, looking at plants and flowers while providing a "stream of consciousness" narrative of inner thoughts. The poem moves across and down the page in fits and starts but seems to flow because of the regular indentation and incorporation of space (and the musical elements in the poem). "Space," comments one critic, " which touched her excellent short poems at every point from the outside, has now 'penetrated all the way in' to become part here of a new, flowing and sustained music" (Tomlinson, 9).

This is the only long poem, as such, that Niedecker wrote though, of course, she wrote several long poem sequences: "in *Wintergreen Ridge*, . . ., Lorine took the deliberate step toward a poem conceived as long and unified in execution throughout," remarks one of the few critics to point this out (Cox, "Longer," 397)[2]. "Wintergreen Ridge" is also notable for using the stepped three-line stanza which is very similar to some of Carlos Williams' later forms, as several critics have observed. "Reading each of the triadic poems," comments one critic on Carlos Williams, "we have the sense of an occasion, a ceremonial movement" (Cushman, 92), and as I have already indicated this is applicable to Niedecker's "Wintergreen Ridge". The stanza form here certainly contributes to the movement of the poem as well as its atmosphere, and Caddel notes

> the rhapsodic, linear quality of 'Wintergreen Ridge', . . . where the adoption of a 'regular' verse structure (three line groups reminiscent of Williams) occludes – albeit without destroying – the integrity of the individual parts *as parts*. The contrast here is between a concern for unity in 'Wintergreen Ridge' and the concern for community – a drawing together of like-minded entities – in 'Lake Superior'. ("Place," 116)

I will look again at "Wintergreen Ridge" in terms of music in the next chapter.

A shorter poem with a fixed stanza is the late "I married" (*Pail*, 93), which has five-line stanzas, the first two lines on the left margin, the next two equally indented, with the final line again on the left margin (similar to "How white the gulls"). Although the stanzas may not be immediately recognisable as such (separate groups divided by blank lines) there is a striking division working vertically. This is due to the indentation of the third and fourth lines of each stanza separating them from the rest of the stanza, while connecting them with the indented lines of the whole poem. (This impression is aided by the fact that the final lines of each stanza are too short to "overlap" the indented lines, so they remain isolated in white space – again as in "How white the gulls", though the effect here is heightened by repetition). Such disjunction serves to reflect or emphasize the subject of the poem, indeed the poem's form could mimetically mirror the situation of husband and wife who are supposed to be united in the form of marriage but are in fact separated – even isolated – from each other within the regular routine of married life.

I hope I have given some idea of the range of forms Niedecker uses for her poetry, and how she manages to incorporate space into them for various reaons and effects. Once again we have seen that Niedecker not only uses the traditions and methods of previous poets, but she tries to push forward with experiments of her own. However, it is interesting to note here what Niedecker wrote to one correspondent about a poet who also used forms incorporating large amounts of space:

> Larry Eigner excites and disturbs me, everything omitted but the (I almost said *obstruction*, the blocks that stumble against – the – in LZ's case, esp. the Cats, the strictures, structures . . . you too used the word structure in your letter – it comes in bullets, in jets and that's the modern way. In nouns. I feel so sad because my whole life at least up to this very moment, for me, has been flow because that's how I feel the music and the quiet . . . (Letter to Cox, 19 Sep. 1969, "Extracts," 39)

Thus we can see that Niedecker did not wish to go too far, to damage the flow of words and music she thought so important for poetry. I hope that this chapter has also made clear that poetic form – the way the words are arranged on the page – is closely related to structures of sound (rhythm and rhyme) or "music", which I will examine in the next chapter.

III. "Such a thing as silence": Silence as an integral part of Niedecker's poetics.

9. SOUND: "you sound your poem in silence"

It may seem odd to include a chapter on sound in a study with silence as its theme but Niedecker was well aware of the importance of sound (and silence), writing to Corman (I have taken part of this statement as my chapter heading), "if your ear is acute you sound your poem in silence" (Letter to Corman, 3 May 1967, *Between*, 121). In another letter she described her poetry as "a filled silence" and "each person reading it a silence to be filled" (Letter to Cox, 23 Nov. 1970, "Extracts," 42).

Many critics talk of the "musical" qualities of Niedecker's poetry but the term "musical" in a discussion of poetry is difficult to define. Several poets at around the same time as Niedecker and in the same kind of avant-garde or experimental tradition, were also concerned with "music" in their poetry. Two poets most likely to have influenced Niedecker, or to have paralleled her thinking on the subject of music and poetry, are Pound and Zukofsky. Pound's concept of "melopoeia" was certainly a great influence on Zukofsky and, as Faranda points out in her notes to the Niedecker-Corman correspondence, on Niedecker as well (*Between*, 65-66). However, it was unlike Niedecker to take anything at face value and she penetrated to what she saw as the heart of the matter when she wrote of Pound, "Most amazing thing his writing music when it seems he has no 'ear' for it, no ability to carry a tune" (Letter to Zukofsky, 15 Jan. 1961, *Correspondence*, 273). Zukofsky, surrounded by music and musicians in his family circle, was intensely involved in bringing music and poetry together. In his 1931 essay "An Objective", Zukofsky had set out the importance "of thinking with things as they exist, and of *directing them along a line of melody* [my italics]" (*Prepositions*, 12) and later in "*A*"-12 he described his "poetics" as "An integral/ Lower limit speech/ Upper limit music" ("*A*", 138). Niedecker's letters to Zukofsky reveal an apparent unwillingness to go as far and she once wrote to him, "isn't it true that some poetry – and it can be good poetry – is not to be set to music? Or do you mean that all poetry is capable, if it's good, to be set to some kind of music?" (Letter to Zukofsky, 12 Jan. 1947, *Correspondence*,

142). This may have been because, while Zukofsky was closer to, more intimate with music, the upper limit, Niedecker herself was more interested in the lower limit, speech – I will discuss this further below.

Yet Niedecker developed her own ideas about "music" in poetry and about how to include it in her own work. "I can't be entirely content, it seems," she wrote, "without some puzzlement, some sharpness, a bit of word-play, a kind of rhythm and music in however small a way" (Letter to Corman, 15 Dec. 1966, *Between*, 108). And certainly one critic has commented that, "in Niedecker, the force of the Objectivist principles of sincerity and objectification is in a way as directly related to the ear's capacity for registration as in the work of Zukofsky" (Heller, "Light," 49). Niedecker's dissatisfaction with haiku-like poetry may also partly have stemmed from her fascination with "music" and sound play, and in an interesting parallel to her later statement above, she once remarked of Corman's poetry, "Not much wit as we know it, not much music, but o what art" (Letter to Zukofsky, 13 Jun. 1962, *Correspondence*, 315). Towards the end of her life, Niedecker stated the importance of both sound and silence for her poetry: "my whole life . . . has been flow because that's how I feel the music and the quiet" (Letter to Cox, 19 Sep. 1969, "Extracts," 39).

Niedecker's "music" is her use and manipulation of sound, and could be called rhyme, meaning not only similar sound-endings at the ends of lines but also similarities of sound such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and repetition. Of course, Niedecker loved drawing out connections of all kinds and I have already quoted Lodge's statement that, "The formal rules of poetry (i.e.verse) – metre, rhyme, stanzaic form, etc. – are based on relationships of *similarity* [his italics]" (88). Niedecker also employed rhythm, especially in conjunction with rhyme, and although her use of rhythm and regular rhyme is concentrated in the early folk and nursery poems, she continued to incorporate various forms of rhyme throughout her work. Folk music and nursery rhymes influenced Niedecker: she told Corman she listened to "folky records" (Letter to Corman, 13 Oct. 1966, *Between*, 102), later writing wryly, "I'd like not to be steeped in traditional music" (Letter to Corman, 3 May 1967, *Between*, 121), and she revealed to Cox how this influence began early with "a happy outdoor grandfather who somehow, somewhere had

got hold of nursery and folk rhymes to entrance" her (Letter to Cox, 10 Dec. 1966, "Extracts," 36). Niedecker's influences are clear from the titles of her first collection, *New Goose*, another group of poems, "Ballads", and two poems in *Harpsichord & Salt Fish*, "Nursery Rhyme" and "The Ballad of Basil". DuPlessis describes "I rose from marsh mud" as "ballad-like" (103) and discusses more fully how other Niedecker poems might be said to "draw on the ballad tradition" (112).

> . . . ballad is good for expressing the implacability of the things that happen, especially in personal relations involving grief, violent emotions, or events about which one is powerless. . . . Actions have little background or motivation . . . ballads spotlight circumstantialities – names, places, times, colors of dresses – but leave motivation, psychology, and rationales totally in shadow. In ballads we get the effects not the causes. (112)

This especially applies to Niedecker poems "spoken" by a persona where the reader is given very few clues about "background or motivation" and Niedecker's attraction to folk speech means that very often the "speaker" does not explain the deeper implications of whatever gossip they relate.

It has been suggested that, "one reason Niedecker may have been neglected is not because her writing is difficult, her subjects uneventful, but *because her rhythms are not always immediately perceivable* [my italics]" (Butterick, 232). In many cases this may be true, for Niedecker is more often irregular than regular in her metre (as I have shown in the previous chapter). Yet, in poems like "Tell me a story about the war" (*Life*, 43) and "What horror to awake at night" (*Life*, 48) the jingle-jangle of rhythm and rhyme contrasts the serious subject matter. I have mentioned in chapter 4 DuPlessis' observation connecting nursery rhymes and political mockery, and I have shown how Niedecker uses her own "nursery" rhymes in this way. "Tell me a story" and many other rhymes fulfil this function, though "What horror" is not as overtly concerned with social problems and may have more in common with the popular nursery rhyme "Ring-a-ring-a-roses", which, in childish rhyming language, describes the symptoms leading to death by plague. In the case of the nursery rhyme, the subject has been erased because we no longer listen to the words, but in Niedecker's poem the juxtaposition of trivial jingling rhyme (and the trivialities of life that have occupied the speaker) and the tragic realization that these trivial things are just that ("nothing", worthless) is effective indeed. DuPlessis describes it

as "one of [Niedecker's] fiercest poems" (102) and this force stems directly from the tension between rhyme and rhythm and subject: the words are stretched in two directions, describing a personal tragedy but sounding childish and silly.

"Remember my little granite pail?" (*Life*, 24) is frequently picked out for discussion by critics because the strong rhythm and rhyme make a memorable impression. Donald Wesling remarks that, "rhymed words leap easily from the page to the ear to the memory. Their mnemonic adhesiveness is such that sometimes it seems impossible to dislodge them from the mind" (ix), while Craig La Drière states that in a poem, "sound may be conspicuously more elaborately structured, and so more important in the total form, than meaning (. . .), or meaning more than sound," commenting that, "most poems in fact attempt more on the side of meaning than on that of sound" (97-98). "Remember my little granite pail?" does not have a particularly "elaborate" sound structure, but sound – rhythm and rhyme – seems more important and striking than meaning, so we remember the poem better. Critics apparently feel that such a memorable poem ought to have a serious subject, and this prompts them to speculate on the "meaning" of this and similar poems, when the words are fairly straightforward and hold no hidden significance.

Another critic writes, "the use of repetition in poetic creation . . . frequently does not make sense but . . . does make superb sound" (Sternfield, 37). Thus poems like "The music, lady" (*Collected*, 151) and "She had tumult of the brain" (*Life*, 25) may remain obscure but can please us as readers purely because of their qualities of sound. In "An Objective", Zukofsky described a poem as a "context associated with 'musical' shape, musical in quotation marks since it is not of notes as of music, but of words more variable than variables, and used outside as well as within the context of communicative reference" (*Prepositions*, 16), so that words are used in poetry for more than the transmission of meaning.

> With Zukofsky's poetry, sound often has a parallel relationship with meaning; that is, one reads a poem such as "*A*"-22 for its sound and only later, and laboriously, for its meaning. At this late stage, his interest in conventional semantic coherence was minimal. Sound and meaning do, of course, intersect but not immediately . . . (Penberthy, *Correspondence*, 94)

An interesting example of Zukofsky's work with sound are his Catullus translations, where the words of the translations have been chosen for their sound, with the intent of reflecting the sound of the original Latin, as Zukofsky explained in his "Translators' Preface" to the poems (*Short*, 243).

A recent study describes the results of this approach to poetry:

> . . . the only firm thing to hold onto in the poem, that holds the poem together, is not *meaning* in the sense of an encapsulation which can be cashed in at the end of the reading in exchange for the knowledge-claim that "this is what the poems means," but *language*, the voices, the play in and of language, the dialogue with the poem taking place in the reader's consciousness, moving toward some sort of cognition or recognition of meaning and structure . . . (Quartermain, 19)

"I get for the first time that meaning has something to do with song," wrote Niedecker in 1965, "one hesitates a bit longer with some words in some lines for the thought or the vision – but I'd say mostly, of course, cadence, measure make song" (Letter to Corman, 2 Jul. 1965, *Between*, 64). A few years later she remarked that in some poems the reader gets "the sense out of the sound" (Letter to Corman, 10 Jan. 1968, *Between*, 145). It is interesting to note that the late group, "Subliminal" (*Harpsichord,* 31), in which Niedecker returned to a more surrealist approach, employs different variations of sound or rhyme. ("The sense of what's seen"; "tall, tormented/ darkinfested"; "Waded, watched, warbled"; "clock's/ constellations"; "star-ticks" and "flicks"; "The lip/ of tipped lily"; "hound-/ howl/ holed"; "of day" and "no day"). Perhaps Niedecker felt that this use of sound added another dimension to the poem and it certainly makes it easier to read and more enjoyable than earlier surrealist-influenced poems which have few, if any, comparable patterns of sound.

The ideas of a theorist like Kristeva can provide interesting sidelights on this issue. Kristeva states that poetic language can produce " 'musical' but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself," and she gives as examples of this kind of poetic language two which are particularly relevant to Niedecker, "carnivalesque discourse" and "certain Dadaist and Surrealist experiments" (133). Kristeva continues,

> Thus in any poetic language, not only do the rhythmic constraints, for example, perform an organizing function that could go so far as to violate certain grammatical rules of a national language and often neglect the importance of an ideatory message,

> but in recent texts, these semiotic constraints (rhythm, phonic, vocalic timbres in Symbolist work, but also graphic disposition on the page) are accompanied by nonrecoverable syntactic elisions; it is impossible to reconstitute the particular elided syntactic category (object or verb), which makes the meaning of the utterance undecidable . . . (134)

Certainly we have seen that Niedecker's poems, especially the folk- and nursery-based works, often emphasize "music" – rhythm and rhyme – to the extent that semantic meaning and grammatical syntax break down, but that the poems are still enjoyable to the reader partly *because* of these strong rhythmic qualities. Kristeva sees the aim of such texts as being "not only to impose a music, a rhythm – that is, a polyphony – but also to wipe out sense through nonsense and laughter" (142). However, she also tries to understand why modern writing in this vein has not been seen as entirely acceptable – "Could the resistance against modern literature be evidence of an obsession with meaning . . . ?" (142) – and again we have seen that Niedecker's nonsense rhymes have been neglected and overlooked by critics.

Although Kristeva's male gender-bias has discouraged several feminist critics, parts of her theory can be useful in relating Niedecker's use of nonsense and rhythmic language to Surrealism and some Modernist writers like James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, as well as to the carnivalesque (as we have seen in chapter 4), in a kind of subversion of the rules of language, syntax and semantic meaning. In fact, these features also relate to Niedecker's interest in the sub- and unconscious, shown again in Surrealist and some Modernist writers, with their employment of "automatic writing" and "stream of consciousness" techniques, and their move away from conscious meaning-making.

Niedecker's work with sound, perhaps because of her strong folk element and the influences she could not shake off, often leaned more to the traditional, using rhyme and rhythm, but as indicated, her work can also be seen as subversive in the same way as that of Stein or Joyce. In fact, it is interesting to note that like Niedecker, Stein has been neglected, misrepresented and all but erased from literature, despite producing work as experimental and innovative as male writers in the same tradition and period.[1] Yet Nieecker did not take these language experiments so far as other writers, perhaps because of external pressures, and while some of Niedecker's work is difficult to make sense of, much of it takes a more traditional approach to language and meaning.

Niedecker frequently employs sound to emphasize meaning or subject. Indeed, I have already suggested that the trivial jingling rhyme in "What horror" (heightened in the final stanza by alliteration) reflects the trivial "nothings" on which the speaker has wasted her life. The matching of sound and meaning is clear in a poem like "Fall" (*Collected*, 221):

> Early morning corn
> shock quick river
> edge ice crack duck
> talk
>
> Grasses' dry membranous
> breaks tick-tack tiny
> wind strips

After the long vowels of the first line the short hard "k" sounds "shock" as well as providing the onomatopoeic "cracking" and the harsh quacking of the ducks. The second stanza has more complicated webs of sound, the most obvious again being the hard "k", here combined with stuttering "t"s to give the clattering of corn stalks. However, we also have a set of silibant "s"s ("grasses / membranous / breaks / strips") which could illustrate the hissing of the wind through the long corn grass. The use of the rather awkward "membranous" is interesting; this word is difficult to pronounce out loud but does not present as much of a problem for silent reading. Other poems such as "Chicory flower on campus" (*Life*, 91) and "In the transcendence" (*Collected*, 264) have almost tongue-twisting patterns of sound, which cannot be fully appreciated unless they are read aloud or voiced.

In a less obvious way strong elements of sound in "Hi, Hot-and-Humid" (*Life*, 69) help echo the tone of the poem. The "H" alliteration in the opening line establishes jaunty humour, and the speaker addresses the month June as a person (ambiguously, since June can also be a woman's name) and in a casual friendly manner. The middle lines are a riot of echoed sounds (Niedecker uses alliteration, assonance and consonance but oddly the phrase evoking sound – "frog bickering" – has no sound play) and these reflect not so much the meaning as the mood of the poem. "Rather than according directly with particular emotional states, rhythm reflects – or more properly, is itself part of – the energy conditions that accompany emotion," suggests one commentator on rhythm

(Harding, 101). Here the succession of repeated sounds, the similar lengths of the words and the way "marshmushing" is run on, encourage us to pick up speed or "energy" as we read, so that on finishing we are brought up short by the warning "fool/ keep cool". Even here, however, the obvious rhyme lessens the seriousness of the admonition, in keeping with the light tone of the whole piece.

The same technique is employed to produce quite a different effect in the melancholy thoughtful "Paul" (*Life*, 44). As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the form of this poem on the page adds to its impact, with stepped lines imaging the leaves twisting as they fall, and the sounds reflect this motion in a similar manner. Heller posits "complex musical interplays: rising and dying sounds" ("Light," 54). The multiple "l" sounds ("Paul / leaves / fall / lie / light / fall / playing / leaves / leave / little / Paul") set the slow pace, while other clusters of repeated sounds provide the "rising and dying" notes Heller mentions, for example, "thick / walk", "light / note"; and further clusters involve "complex interplays", like the repetition of "leaves" and "leave", the assonance of "little" and "thin" moving to consonance with "thin things" and the circular repetition of "Paul" at the beginning and ending of the poem. This poem may place more emphasis on sound rather than sense, but again this does nothing to dispel its effect upon us as readers – it is hauntingly memorable.

Repetition of words as well as sounds figure in an early poem which may be a precursor of "Lake Superior" (*Collected*, 146).

> Voyageurs
> sang, rowed
> their canoes full of furs
>
> sang as they rowed,
> Ten minutes every hour
> rested their load.

Here the first word "voyageurs" indicates the importance of qualities of sound, as well as giving a sense of place and history. The repetition – "sang, rowed", "sang as they rowed" – implies the constant activities of singing and rowing, as does the strong rhythm (of the song and the rowing; the song keeps the rowing in time). Alliteration ("full of furs") and the "rowed / load" rhyme might also bring to mind the song. The stress on the last word

"load", as well as emphasizing the rhyme, adds weight – the load is heavy and obliges the rowers to rest. The poem is reminiscent of Marvell's "Bermudas", with its regular rhythm and similar subject matter – "And all the way to guide their Chime/ With falling oars they kept the time" (Gardner, ed., 245).

By the time she wrote the late "Thomas Jefferson" sequence, Niedecker had practised and polished her methods of using sound, and repetitions of words, forms and sounds are major features in its final parts. XVII and XVIII employ the same structure of repetition, though the sounds are different. XVII (*Pail*, 100) parallels the physical decline of Jefferson and his friend Adams.

> John Adams' eyes
> dimming
>
> Tom Jefferson's rheumatism
> cantering

The shorter first stanza with its silibants and murmuring "m"s gives the impression of a failing, a dying away, while the longer, polysyllabic words of the second depict the "cantering" of Jefferon's complaint which rides roughshod over him. Niedecker's placing of the words enhances the effect, with "dimming" failing to reach past the line above, while "cantering" runs on beyond the preceding line. (The parallel is even more significant, for Jefferson and Adams actually died on the same day, the fifitieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence).

XVIII (*Pail*, 100) gives another parallel, this time between Jefferson and his home estate:

> Ah soon must Monticello be lost
> to debts
> and Jefferson himself
> to death

Beginning with the sigh "Ah soon", this poem contains several faint echoing sounds, all with the same sighing feel ("must / lost / debts / Jefferson / himself") while the main parallel "to debts" and "to death" has similar sounds but significantly different endings. "Death" (because of its meaning and association) is a word we always feel to have great finality – here it finishes the poem, but not the sequence. Again, these effects are

maximized by the form of the poem since "death" stands out from the surrounding white space.

The final poem of the sequence (*Pail*, 100) employs far more complex sound patterns with much repetition and balancing of words and sounds, all interrelated with meaning and form. Thus: "mind / body"; "leaving / leave / stay / stay"; "leave / live"; "let body leave" / "let dome live"; "dome / dome / colonnade"; "Martha (Patsy)" and "Anne and Ellen"; the frequent "l" sounds in stanza one; the alliteration and consonance in the third stanza; the near repetition of "Anne and", "Ellen/ all". However, Niedecker does not let the poem trail away, it ends with the definitely pronounced "root", and both "seeds" and "root" might leave the reader feeling hopeful. Again, despite the complexity of all the strands of sound, meaning and association that make up the web of the poem, its actual meaning, while not neccessarily vague (it brings together elements from previous parts in the sequence – architecture, literature, work, family), would not be as strong or as memorable without the supporting patterns of sound.

Niedecker had effectively used similar patterns of sound in her long poem sequence "Paean to Place" (*Life*, 14), though here they are more irregular and rely more on alliteration. The opening stanzas which make up part 1 contain a great many sound devices. The "flood / mud" rhyme is probably more obvious than "born / sworn" in the second stanza, owing to the sense pulling against line endings but the major impact is of alliteration – "f" in the first stanza and "sw" in the second, though this is backed up by lesser strands ("l" sounds through stanza one and into two, and the repetition of "water"). In this case, the profusion of echoing sounds might reflect the constant noise of living near a river populated by varied wildlife, as well as the many different kinds of plants and animals in the neighbourhood. This applies generally to the whole sequence – Niedecker described it as "a lush mush-music but like this place" (Letter to Corman, undated, 10/22/68-11/21/68, *Between*, 176). The whole sequence is saturated with such rhymes and off-rhymes, repetitions and other chimings, but the rhymes, though frequent, are often submerged in the pull of sense or statement.

It is interesting to discuss the long poem "Wintergreen Ridge" (*Life*, 118) in the context of sound and silence. In the previous chapter I noted that its form is flowing, and

suggested that this is partly because of its sound, its musical qualities. Niedecker described the poem as "a bit of a departure," remarking, "I'm music-involved" (Letter to Williams, undated, Jargon), yet aside from occasional alliteration or consonance, "Wintergreen Ridge" does not use obvious sound devices such as those demonstrated in other poems. The "musical" qualities of the poem seem to derive directly from speech, or rather from the phrasing and flow of the words as read.

"The poem moves without internal division or punctuation through 282 run-on lines," comments one critic (Cox, "Longer," 397) and indeed the most notable feature of this long poem is the way it "runs on", its movement and flow, which seems unhampered by the verse-form that Niedecker adopted (we recall from the previous chapter what Niedecker had said of the "blocks" in Larry Eigner's work). This is partly because the stanzas are formed so as to take account of sentence phrasing (meaning), as in its opening lines, "Where the arrows/ of the road signs/ lead us". These line-breaks, therefore, aid rather than hinder our apprehension of the poem's sense or meaning, while subtle use of sound aids our reading (sounding?) process. Thus although the lines "Crete perhaps/ and further:/ 'Every creature" form one stanza, taken out of context they are not a separate or coherent block, yet the repeated sound in "Crete" and "creature" helps unify them as such even within the larger context of the whole poem. Likewise the chimings of sound in the following lines make connections between the line-units (separated according to phrasing).

Nobody, nothing
    ever gave me
        greater thing

than time
    unless light
        and silence

which if intense
    makes sound

The splitting of the poem's flow into such short lines and phrase-units also adds to the sense of the poem as a commemorative inscription. They force the reader to read slowly and deliberately, if at a constant speed. The unrolling stanzas and sentences imply

inevitability and the continuation of life as described in the poem, and our reading from the page incorporates both the line-units as short phrases and the silences in between (although sentences run on across lines and stanzas, the form of the poem requires us to acknowledge, however fleetingly, the pauses at line-ends). It is this combination of form and sound in the poem that gives it its indefinable flowing grace and its last lines resonate in the reader's memory as a pattern of sound and silence:

It rained
    mud squash
        willow leaves

in the eaves
    Old sunflower
        you bowed

to no one
    but Great Storm
        of Equinox

"To defeat expectation, the device is warped, re-positioned, used as instance rather than design in unmetred poems with variable line breaking," writes Wesling of rhyme in modern poetry (119). Certainly Niedecker, moving away from the folk- and nursery-influenced poems of her early writing career, continued to use rhyme and other sound devices, but the rhymes became irregular if not infrequent: one critic mentions "a rhyme that as often as not lands not quite where one expects it to" (Kleinzahler, 9-10). In fact, some are not so much irregular as unobtrusive. For example, Niedecker has a habit of rhyming the last words of stanza pairs, as in "My coat threadbare" (*Life*, 24), "I'm a sharecropper" (*Life*, 30) and "Depression years" (*Life*, 51). Of course, this is not obvious until the reader reaches the last word of the poem – and indeed even then it may not be noticed (consciously) because of the distance between the two rhyming words – but it can draw the poem together, rounding off a statement or observation. Similarly, but much more obviously, Niedecker uses a couplet to finish the poem "Well, spring overflows the land" (*Life*, 33). "The aesthetic quality of the couplet," writes one commentator on rhyme, "is clinchingness" (Fraser, 68), while Wesling claims, "the couplet is the most memorable rhyme form, because of its maximal closure" (77): it is

certainly ideal for finishing a poem, leaving the reader with a memorable, epigrammatic summing up.

The occurrence of obvious and unobtrusive rhyme in Niedecker's poetry is interesting, for each can be utterly irregular and random, or regular, if not exactly rigid, and often unobtrusiveness is due to the sense and flow of the words. (Just as with a strong pattern of sounds, a poem's content or meaning is diminished, so the converse can be true). One instance of a less obvious rhyme is "I married" (*Pail*, 93), discussed in the previous chapter for its striking form. The two short lines (three and four) of each stanza form a couplet, supposedly the "most memorable rhyme form" (Wesling also notes that "rhymes will seem stronger in short-line poems," 75) but this rhyme can be passed over, or, where noted, seems coincidental. This is due to several different factors – the poem has long and short lines of varying metre; there are more unrhymed lines than rhymed; only two of the couplets are "true" rhymes ("repose / close" and "untaught / thought") the other two being half- or off-rhymes ("leg / head" and "married / unburied"). Sense is also a disrupting factor, for in at least two of the stanzas we run the lines on ("for warmth/ if not repose" and "At the close –/ someone"; "We lay leg/ in the cupboard" and "head/ in closet"), de-emphasizing the line endings and thus the rhymes. Of the two remaining stanzas, the last has the "weakest" rhyme ("married / unburied") and its uneven metre further disconcerts the rhyme. (The rhyme in "Audobon" [*Life*, 26] is similar to that discussed above, though different in structure, with only two out of four rhymes being "true" and because of the sense, only one – the last – being at all obvious).

In short poems where rhymes, sometimes more obvious and sometimes less so, do not seem to add anything to the poems, they can seem almost accidental. Three of the poems from the "In Exchange for Haiku" group have rhymes occurring in consecutive (but unmetred) lines. Thus, "If only my friend" (*Life*, 77) rhymes "leaves" and "eaves"; "Springtime's wide" (*Life*, 77) gives "yield / field" and "July, waxwings" (*Life*, 78) has "red / dead". More obvious and effective use of rhyme occurs in "My friend tree" (*Life* 23) where the rhyme ("attend / friend") is closer to couplet form due to equal line length, and its adds to the tone – almost nursery and not very serious. "Something in the water" (*Life*, 82) gains maximum effect by repeating "flower / devour / flower", and from the

contrast in the meaning of these words. In the latter, Niedecker draws attention to the rhyme, though considering her very careful selection of particular words, it is hard to believe that any of these rhymes are as casual as they might appear – it would be suspiciously coincidental for a poem of about ten words to contain two that rhyme. Wesling's comment on H. D.'s "Oread" could apply to many of Niedecker's shorter poems: "the linkages of sound do not fall at predictable places in the lines; so, while the little poem is densely packed with devices, they are hardly identified as such" (12). In Niedecker the "linkages of sound" may come at "predictable places in the lines" (rhymes at line endings) but they are "hardly identified" as rhymes because the sense of the poem leads us to read over them.

Perhaps one reason for the unobtrusiveness of these rhymes is the difference between the eye and the ear, the page and the voice. Of the "In Exchange for Haiku" poems, Penberthy remarks, "Unlike many of the earlier poems that tended to trip off the tongue – the *New Goose* poems, for example – these read slowly, requiring the reader to *sound* them" (*Correspondence*, 77). Niedecker's interest in speech and spoken language, as well as her influences from folk music, ballad and nursery rhyme, and her belief in the importance of sound, led her to experiment with sound and rhyme, but in reading silently from the printed page much of the effect can be lost. Such difficulties arise because of what Kammer calls "the paradox of voice centred poems that are not written for the voice" (159).

Hence, although one Niedecker critic claims that she "managed to synthesize the rhythms of 'common speech' " (Gibson, 124), the "paradox" stands: the lines of a poem do not normally correspond to speech blocks, and poetry cannot imitate speech rhythms *because it is poetry* and we as readers are always aware of that fact. Further, since poetry is written down, it displays features unconnected with sound that speech clearly does not have – I have shown in the previous chapter how important the placing of the words on the page can be and this is something difficult, if not impossible to communicate in a reading.

"Most of us admit that modern poetry is often different heard and read," writes one critic, "Attention to breathing can partly communicate the configuration of the

printed page, but cannot capture the spatial relations among written words" (Nelson, 199). In 1966, grappling with these problems and struggling to find new ways of writing poetry that would satisfy the new ways of reading it, Charles Olson wrote his influential essay, "Projective Verse", in which the following passage appears. (Note Olson's comparison with music and musicians).

> It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for the poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done with his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (22)

Whether she was too old to change, or simply too committed to her belief that the words on the page were more important than any oral rendition, Niedecker, despite her concern with sound, did not subscribe to this theory. One critic agrees, remarking of her work that, "in all but a few special cases, vocal realization neglects, deforms or exaggerates the features of the verse. The delicacy and variety of Lorine's versification are to be apperceived by careful silent reading from a good text" (Cox, "Longer," 40). Although later generations of critics and readers have found that it is not so simple as Olson makes out, the use of spacing and typology is now considered an integral part of poetry, as discussed in the previous chapter.

An interest in speech and idiom is evident from the very beginning of Niedecker's writing career, as a poem from her 1922 high school yearbook, "Wasted Energy" (*Collected*, 237), demonstrates. We have already seen in chapter 2, that Niedecker took great pleasure in the idiomatic speech of her "folk" and she certainly had an "ear" for speech and dialect, and for a good quotation. All come together in "Letter from Ian" (*Life*, 83), a poem composed from a letter Niedecker received from Ian Hamilton Finlay and Jessie McGuffie, the Scottish publishers of *My Friend Tree* (relevant passages from the letter are given in *Correspondence*, 86). The poem speaks in a Scottish accent mainly because of the small but idiomatic phrases chosen by Niedecker – "aye sure" and "and all" ("pipe bands/ and all"). The short poem, "A student" (*Life* 54), also demonstrates

Niedecker's delight in the way people talk, not just what they say, with its joke about the pronounciation of "cranes" as "crayons" (but in the poem this is an almost visual pun).

There seem to be two aspects of this issue: firstly, what difference or similarity may exist between the spoken and the written; and secondly, the significance of voice or "speaker" in the poem. We have seen in chapter 1 that, despite her belief in the importance of sound, Niedecker avoided public readings of her work. She also stated that, "poems are for one person to another, spoken thus or read silently" (Letter to Corman, 3 May 1967, *Between*, 121). Eventually, when Corman visited her and persuaded her to read some of her poems for tape, Niedecker realized that reading aloud could cause problems for a poem: "I think a person conscious of a listening audience would write just a tiny bit differently from the way he would for print i.e. my line that says 'Martha (Patsy) stay' I should have read aloud as 'Martha (Patsy, that is)' " (Letter to Gail and Bonnie Roub, 1970, quoted in *Between*, 241).

"In free verse," writes D. W. Harding in his book on rhythm, "the dominance of natural speech is unmistakable" (155) and indeed many of the poems in which Niedecker uses speech are written in looser forms (though this is by no means always the case). However, the rhythms of "natural speech" can dominate a poem to the extent that the form (rhyme or metre) is submerged: speech patterns are partly motivated by grammar and sense and I have already shown how the sense of a poem can disrupt poetic form. For instance, the poem "You know, he said, they used to make" (*Life*, 56) rhymes on the second and fourth lines of each stanza but because of sense and speech it is very easy to remain unaware of this. The first stanza is more metrically regular and thus more likely to be read as a poem, that is, with the line endings and rhyme emphasized, even though sense and speech patterns might arrange words differently. When we reach the second stanza, however, the line lengths are more irregular and we run on the lines to satisfy normal speech blocks and sense ("from there/ to flooring costs"; "buy/ two doors") – the final line is effective for both systems.

In taking on some of the attributes of speech, poetry must also create a voice – Heller describes the Niedecker poem as "a finished or accomplished, yet highly personalized *utterance* [my italics]" (49). Obviously this affects us as readers, and

Kammer gives a possible reaction: "More and more the speaker becomes a focus of interest in the poem – the only available guide through its ambiguities, and the source of its human appeal" (158-9). So this aspect of Niedecker's poetry can add to her "appeal" – we are attracted to poems that talk like us, with all our changes of subject, odd grammar and turns of phrase. Cox remarks of Niedecker's poems, "Many of the poems suppose someone to be saying them and set the immediate human context, the attachments and irritations of domesticity. They catch the inflexion of a voice, establishing relations between persons speaking, spoken to and spoken of" ("Niedecker," 169).

But some critics see disadvantages in this approach and I have already quoted Heller's statement that, "The poet's voice possesses the reader; he is denied the balanced tone and refusal to judge that is, for example, Reznikoff's most obvious quality" ("Light," 49). Letters show that Reznikoff was a poet with whom Niedecker felt a great affinity and at one point she went so far as to say, "I have always felt he was writing my poems for me only better" (Letter to Zukofsky, 22 Nov. 1959, *Correspondence*, 257) but obviously the two differed in their approach to poetic voice. Even a writer such as Carlos Williams with whom Niedecker shares many technical features and poetic concerns, can seem quite different because Carlos Williams' clinical detachment contrasts with Niedecker's subjectivity. To condemn one poet for subjectivity and praise another for objective distance, however, is a conditioned judgement, and intense subjectivity is a criticism often levelled at women writers: they are "too personal" or "not detached enough" (perhaps this is why Niedecker felt that Reznikoff's poetry was "better" than her own). And it is hardly valid to claim that a poet like Reznikoff is entirely neutral, for in choosing a subject he is making a judgement from the beginning. In fact, the subjective-objective argument often seems to be just another excuse for keeping women writers in their place – at the bottom of the pile. A lack of objectivity can provide new poetic opportunities; the poet can take on many different personas, perhaps to make fun of or deride particular views, ideas, or ways of talking, and Niedecker is successful in doing this in poems like "News" (*Collected*, 168), "So you're married young man" (*Condensery*, 72) and "Will you write me a Christmas poem?" (*Collected*, 328). These poems were not published in Niedecker's lifetime and are still not very widely known.

Another problem arising from Niedecker's use of voice (and also perhaps from her methods of condensation) is a potential exclusion of the reader. "Why can't I be happy" (*Collected*, 267) is a good example of this. In chapter 6, I suggested that in this poem the speaker is talking to herself, thus the reader is not directly addressed and may not feel included in the poem. Other Niedecker poems "speak" directly to another person (many of those in the "For Paul" collection, as well as a number of others, for instance, "Art Center" *Life*, 86; "I've been away from poetry" *Life*, 65) or are more general, and though we may feel rather out of it because we do not know exactly what is going on between speaker and addressee, the less private nature of these "utterances" makes them more accessible, as does the humour inherent in many of them.

As well as using a single voice or persona, Niedecker also employs multiple voices. Some of her poems are collages of different voices, the early surrealist-influenced work especially, and as we have seen, many poems throughout her writing life included quotations, sometimes interwoven with the voice of the narrator poet. I have mentioned in chapter 2 the early plays ("Domestic and Unavoidable", *Collected*, 120; "Fancy Another Day Gone", *Collected*, 124; and "The President of the Holding Company", *Collected*, 132), which also use multiple voices (Sturgeon heads this section "Plays for Voices"), overlaying and layering different conversations and sounds, and much of the drama in these short plays stems from Niedecker's delight in the absurdity of overheard conversation. In chapter 4 I have also shown how several poems seem to use news broadcasts as sources for quotation, becoming garbled or paraphrased, perhaps, but recognisable as a certain type of familiar voice.

The passage below discusses the novels of Virginia Woolf, but the comments seem to apply equally well to Niedecker's poetry.

> Her ability to listen to voices of all kinds – conscious and unconscious, animate and inanimate, intended and unintended – involves her in extending the field of sound and thought . . . This also . . . giv[es] voice to those who cannot always speak for themselves, the voices of the obscure, and it includes the collective voices from society – the journalists, the gramophones, and the war planes as well as the voice of memory and lines of poetry from past voices. (Laurence, 203)

Of course, Niedecker was not the first poet to use multiple voices and viewpoints – Pound, Carlos Williams and Zukofsky all experimented with layers of voice and sound,

perhaps especially in their longer poems (as a means of sustaining the poem's extended form?). But critics of Niedecker's work have rarely discussed the importance of this method for her poetry and poetics. Penberthy states, "Such voice-play is possible only in a form more social than the lyric, a form not governed by the solo voice but by conversation. The distinction is crucial to any account of Niedecker's poetics" (*Correspondence*, 64). It is also true that this use of multiple, fragmented voices rather than one omnipresent poetic voice, is another strategy Niedecker employed to diffuse the egotistical "I" in her work.

In some ways, as I have shown, Niedecker's use of sound in her poetry is rather traditional, owing to her influences from folk music and nursery rhyme. However, even this "traditional" aspect is not the tradition of the poetry establishment. It is part of Niedecker's folk base and it also places her in a tradition of experimental, almost subversive modern poetics. However, it has led to disparagement of her work as too simplisitic or naive (when it is far from being so). In other ways too, Niedecker's use of sound and silence, multiple voices and fragmented collages of sounds and voices, can be seen as carrying on subversive and innovative poetic practice. And it seems very true that Niedecker's use of sound is always against the background of silence for the surrounding silence, either the space on the page, the silent intake of a reader, or the silence before and after an oral reading, and this serves to contrast the varied patterns of sound, music and voice found in the poems.

CONCLUSION.

I hope I have demonstrated in the preceding pages how Niedecker's work has been marginalized, neglected and partially erased, and Niedecker herself has been misrepresented and misunderstood. Niedecker's gender and her provincialism can be seen as major factors affecting her critical reception and, because Niedecker has been seen as male-identified, feminist critics have also had ambivalent reactions to her life and work. I have shown how Niedecker at times contributed to her own erasure by accepting her "inferiority" as a woman poet and by choosing as her home a rural and provincial rather than an urban and central location. Niedecker can also be seen to have contributed greatly to the suppression of her early overtly political poems by excluding them from later collections of her work, despite the fact that political and social concerns continued to surface in her poetry throughout her writing life, as we have seen.

As a poet Niedecker has been marginalized because of her choices, influences and associations. She was non-academic, wrote almost no criticism and no formal exegesis of her own work and refused publicity and readings, all of which could imply that her poetry is not to be taken as seriously as that of writers who do involve themselves in these activities – poetry alone is not enough to attract widespread critical acclaim. However, Niedecker certainly did not intend her own strategy of self-effacement to lead to the effacement of her poetry, and her reception among colleagues and critics both in her own lifetime and after has been fixed by factors beyond her control.

Niedecker's surrealism is rarely mentioned by critics, while Objectivism is often mentioned, but both put her on the margins of the poetic canon. Niedecker's use of folk forms, ballad and nursery rhyme – linked to her provincial stance and concerns – are also seen as marginal and not so intellectually or poetically acceptable as more avant-garde traditions. Likewise, haiku is seen as acceptable poetically, though it does not seem to be considered "as good as" more traditional or canonical British or American poetry, perhaps simply because of its brevity. Folk idiom, nursery rhyme, and haiku-like forms can all be represented as simplistic and naive, and are not seen as either innovative or experimental, or as continuing and furthering the practice of poets like Carlos Williams,

Pound and even Whitman. Very few critics have emphasized the elements of political and social satire in early nursery rhymes, though we have seen that Niedecker herself uses her own "nursery" poems in this way. Niedecker's choice of haiku is also significant in that it provided her with a formal alternative to expansive, aggressive egoism.

Niedecker has undoubtedly been marginalized and is generally seen as a marginal poet but I have tried to demonstrate how she fits into traditions of, for example, provincial and nature poetry; English-language oriental-influenced poetry; American poetry, and women's poetry. It is perhaps problematic for some readers that Niedecker takes on some of the methods and traditions of essentially male Modernism (use of quotation, incorporation of various sources of knowledge, collage form), while making use of other traditions from women's writing (using the natural world as a figure for sexuality, an interest in and valuing of the domestic, use of the unspoken and an attraction to letters, journals and other forms of personal writing). However, as well as demonstrating Niedecker's struggle for identity as a poet and as a woman, this also proves her ability to take what she wanted from any source and synthesize it into her own original work. Some of these traditions have been more visible than others, yet Niedecker is more often seen as an anomalous poet than one who uses and furthers existing poetic ideas. As I have shown, she does not fit easily into any one category and this may be part of the reason for this oversight.

But although Niedecker has links with some cultural and poetic traditions, we have also seen that she subverts others: as a woman writer; as a woman poet among men; in her use of radical politics for poetry; in her choice of "unpoetic" subjects. Niedecker's poetics can be viewed as equally subversive. Both the surrealist and the folk traditions feed into her poetics of language-play and silence, collage and juxtaposition, quotation and transcription. Use of quotation is obvious in many Niedecker poems, but if critics remark on this it is usually in a comparison with Pound (generally an unfavourable one) while the differences in Niedecker's methods of selection and juxtaposition, and their different effects are seldom noticed. I have shown how these poems often relate to gender or the split between personal and public indentity and it has become clear that in some ways these long poem sequences which use base texts can be read as subversion as

well as re-presentation. The subversive nature of Niedecker's poetics may be one reason for the critical silence on her original, innovative, often radical poetic techniques and methods.

In my discussion of Niedecker "and silence", I have shown that by taking on the ideas of critics like Patricia Ondek Laurence, Niedecker can be seen to have used silence (and nonsense) in her poetry, as a subversion of patriarchal traditions of valued speech. I have also indicated that Niedecker chose silence rather than self-promotion perhaps as a kind of resistance to ideas of literary fame for (male) writers, as implied by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her construction of Niedecker as the "anonymous". Niedecker used silence in many ways: as a personal strategy for a woman poet among men, for a poet among a working and working class community, and for a provincial writer in a literary world revolving around urban and academic centres. All of these are apparent in her poetry as well as her life.

It is not only ideas of Niedecker's work that must change if we are to gain a fuller picture of her work and her identity as a poet: we must question wider assumptions about poetry, literary value and the canon of literature. Tompkins' study in a different period and genre has raised several points on this score, but as my thesis demonstrates, these questions and resistances are applicable to other areas of literature, and can lead to valuable new readings of certain works or authors as well as opening up more general debates.

In this thesis I intended to break new ground and offer original readings, but as I have indicated at certain points, there are many areas which would reward further detailed research and discussion. For example, a more detailed examination of the influence of Surrealism in Niedecker from the early stage plays and poems of the thirties right through to *Harpsichord & Salt Fish* would be interesting (Penberthy has already provided some informative material on the early period in her edition of Niedecker's letters to Zukofsky). Several critics have begun looking at Niedecker in terms of gender, and I have certainly taken it as a major "angle" for my own study, though further work on the complications of gender in Niedecker's literary relationships, her affinities with other women writers, and gender-related readings of her poems will surely be even more

helpful to our understanding of the poet and her work. I have probably shown that I see one of the most important practical steps to be taken in Niedecker criticism is simply to involve and discuss the whole range of Niedecker's poems, though obviously this remains difficult without a complete edition in print. Certainly this thesis is not intended as the definitive word in Niedecker studies. I see it, as I hope others may, as something to be built on or argued with, a starting point, an invitation to break some of the silences surrounding Niedecker and her work.

Niedecker's position (always exacerbated by gender) – socially, geographically, poetically – was off the map, but this position was chosen deliberately. She knew how most people (local or literary) saw her, but her own self-acceptance enabled her to transcend in many ways the limits set upon her, and to value what she had made, both of her life and of her poetry. Niedecker once wrote of Zukofsky, Corman, and herself, "we are the long-range people" (Letter to Corman, postmarked 6/8/65, *Between*, 59) and a recent review takes this phrase as its title, commenting "the tone of resignation is characteristic, but so is the quiet confidence in an audience to come" (Nichols, 28). It is unlikely that Niedecker will gain a wide audience, or even a substantial one until there is a reasonable and available complete edition of her poetry, but she has at least attracted a sustained readership and critical interest to date.

The attraction of this remarkable poet and Niedecker's own perceptive awareness of the situation are perhaps best summed up in her own words. This poem demonstrates Niedecker's simplicity of expression and the hidden complexity of her poetic structures, but above all it shows the clarity of her vision.

> Your erudition
> the elegant flower
> of which
>
> my blue chicory
> at scrub end
> of campus ditch
>
> illuminates (*Pail*, 94)

NOTES.

Notes to Introduction.

[1] Details of my sources are given in the list of Works Cited, with published letters under the "Lorine Niedecker" heading, and unpublished manuscript material at the end of the section. Although a handful of Niedecker's letters to Jonathan Williams were published in the special edition of *Truck* magazine, to avoid unnecessary confusion I have cited all the Williams correspondence as coming from the Jargon Press archive in Buffalo. As Penberthy's edition of the Niedecker-Zukofsky correspondence is not comprehensive, I have also quoted from unpublished letters to Zukofsky from the Louis Zukofsky collection in Austin.

[2] Shortly before Niedecker's death there seemed to be a possibility of Corman bringing out a new edition of her work: "Yes, we talk in November about possibility or yr. making up a book," wrote Niedecker to Corman (Letter to Corman, 14 Feb. 1970, *Between*, 216), before his visit to Wisconsin. This may have been what Niedecker had in mind when she made up "The Very Veery" and "The Earth and its Atmosphere" manuscripts now held in Boston. However, Corman's *The Granite Pail* does not follow these selections.

Notes to chapter 1.

[1] Letters reveal that apart from Corman, both Jonathan Williams and Ian Hamilton Finlay attempted to persuade Niedecker to record readings of her work. In 1963 she quoted Hamilton Finlay's letter to Zukofsky: "my idea, which is, that you must somehow get the loan of a tape machine, and TALK these poems onto some tape. . . You MUST talk them on tape for people's delight! PLEASE, PLEASE." Niedecker commented dryly, "O dear Lord, such enthusiasm!" (Letter to Zukofsky, 24 Feb. 1963, *Correspondence*, 329). Later, in 1967, she sent a poem to Corman with the comment, "Above to have been spoken to tape the day JW was here but then gave up the idea – I've never read aloud" (Letter to Corman, postmarked 16/3/67, *Between* 119).

[2] Although Jane Knox's *Lorine Niedecker: An Original Biography* is available freely to anyone visiting the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson, it is not a very detailed account, nor is it specifically a literary biography. Glenna Breslin is generally recognized as Niedecker's literary biographer, but as yet she has not published a book-length biographical account.

[3] For some bizarre editorial reason Niedecker appears in the latest edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, although poets like Zukofsky and the other Objectivists are absent. Nine poems are included – "Poet's Work", "I married", "My Life by Water", "Lake Superior", "He lived – childhood summers", "Old mother turns blue and from us", "Watching dancers on skates", "Well, spring overflows the land" and "Paean to Place". Some of these choices seem odd, but most of the poems are late works, all but one of which appear in *My Life By Water*, and all are included in *The Granite Pail.*

Notes to chapter 2.

[1] Robert Crawford's book, *Devolving English Literature*, addresses the question of the centrality of English literature (as opposed to, for example, Scottish or American literature) and has been very helpful in this area of "provinciality".

[2] Niedecker mentions these poems in the following letters to Zukofsky: "Old mother turns blue and from us", 31 Jul. 1951, *Correspondence*, 131; "Regards to Mr. Glover", 23 May 1948, *Correspondence*, 147; "A student", 2 May 1961, *Correspondence*, 279 and 14 Jan. 1962, Correspondence, 298; "Two old men", 31 Jul. 1951, *Correspondence*, 181.

[3] Although Penberthy includes some of this letter in her *Correspondence*, she inexplicably omits this significant section.

[4] In *Correspondence*, Penberthy dates this letter "Xmas", though in my own notes from the collection at Austin I have dated it "May". Here I rely on my own dating.

Notes to chapter 3.

[1] In a letter Niedecker complains, "Darwin on the earth worms – the ag. dep't has taken a quote or two for its own booklet, otherwise no copy conveniently available to me here" (Letter to Corman, 17 Jun. 1970, *Between*, 227), although her long sequence "Darwin" proves that she must have read other writings by Darwin. In her collection at home Niedecker had *The Insect World of J. Henri Fabré*. An early letter to Zukofsky describes Niedecker's experience of hearing about Kumlein from his grandaughter Mrs. Main, and Niedecker commented, "Supplementing this, I looked up Kumlein this past week in the historical papers in the library" (Letter to Zukofsky, 18 May 1941, *Correspondence* 125-9). Niedecker also owned Angie Kumlein Main's account, *Thure Kumlein of Koshkonong, Naturalist*. Poems on Kumlein include "Thure Kumlein" (*Condensery*, 80; earlier drafts of the same poem occur on pages 56-57, "I'd like to tell you about a man" and 78-79, "He was here before the wild white swans died out") and "Shut up in woods" (*Life*, 67). Niedecker also wrote poems on Audobon ("Audobon" *Life*, 26 and "Is there someone" *Collected*, 264), Crèvecoeur ("To Paul now old enough to read" *Life*, 49), and Linnaeus ("Linnaues in Lapland" *Life*, 85).

[2] Niedecker wrote to Williams: "The title *For Poem* [sic] may not be best. Perhaps dedicate the book to Paul and use as title: *Forms* or even *Forms For Paul* or *Fellow Matter*" (Letter to Williams, 11 Dec. 1956, Jargon), but a short time later she wrote again asking for Williams' opinion on the title "For Paul", remarking, "In any case I've given up the idea of dedication" (Letter to Williams, 24 Dec. 1956, Jargon). After another few days, however, Niedecker told Williams she "shouldn't go ahead with printing," and concludes: "I'll be working in the direction of the short Japanese-devised poems like July, the waxwings and Old man who'd seined from now on so that a book of those might be ready in a year or two" (Letter to Williams, 29 Dec. 1956, Jargon).

[3] Flowers and plants mentioned in the *My Life By Water* selection alone include marsh marigold, sunflowers, lilacs, cattails, roses, lupines, lilies, clover, tulips, and the many rare or exotic species described in "Wintergreen Ridge".

[4] Niedecker actually empathizes with the suicide, "A woman in Fort threw herself into the river off the bridge one night last week. 'She must have been insane,' they said – you

can't help but feel it must have been a lucid moment among the patches of ice" (Letter to Zukofsky, 1947, Austin).

5 Penberthy includes a small portion of this letter in *Correspondence*, but not the part I have quoted, perhaps deliberately suppressing what she sees as negative material.

Notes to chapter 4.

1 Sturgeon attests (*Collected*, 292) that a "Mother Goose" group was submitted for publication to Harriet Monroe, but this was later revised and published as "Mother Geese" by James Laughlin in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 1 (1936). The *New Directions* group consisted of "O let's glee glow as we go", "There's a better shine", "Scuttle up the workshop", "My coat threadbare", "The land of four o'clocks is here", "Lady in the Leopard Coat", "Fascist Festival" ["The music, lady"], "To war they kept/ us going", "Petrou his name was sorrow", "The eleventh of progressional", "In speaking spokes the mighty", "Young girl to marry", "Missus Dorra", "Motor cars/ like china", "I spent my money", and "Trees over the roof". It is notable that only two of these appear in *My Life By Water*, and only one might be considered a well-known Niedecker poem. Sturgeon also suggests that a *New Goose* manuscript was ealier rejected (see "To Maryland editor, 1943", *Collected*, 140 – mentioned also on page 74) before *New Goose* was published by James Decker in 1946. *New Goose* incorporates several of the "Mother Goose/ Geese" poems.

2 Niedecker mentions social security as her source of income in letters. "My heart is in Japan," she wrote to Corman, "but my social security checks are committed to everything under the sun" (Letter to Corman, 27 Aug. 1965, *Between*, 70). To Williams she explained, "I am not in too good a position right now to pay to have poems published, Jonathan. I suppose $10 out of each social security check each month could be managed nicely. I'd start saving now for the time the book would be finished" (Letter to Williams, 27 Aug. 1965, Jargon).

3 It is clear from letters that Niedecker often overpaid for books or publications sent to her, and she hoped to aid at least one younger poet in his career, though perhaps not in a financial sense: "If I last ten years longer and Keith Owen of London makes his Japanese-

influenced poetry last (I'll be over seventy by then and he . . . will still be young) I'll want to do what I can for him" (Letter to Williams, 27 Aug. 1965, Jargon).

[4] Many of the letters in the Niedecker-Zukofsky correspondence refer to such gifts, too many to list here.

[5] Part of this letter is included in Penberthy's *Correspondence*, but not this particular passage.

[6] It is interesting that Niedecker here seems to confuse the slightly different problems of racism and imperialism. Despite seeming to set herself against imperialism – "Funny, if you smell imperialism what a different reflection it puts on things" (Letter to Zukofsky, "Xmas" 1947, *Correspondence*, 145) – she admired T. E. Lawrence and concluded, "He's still my great *man* (not ideal) and he wrote beautifully" (Letter to Zukofsky, 9 Nov. 1970, *Correspondence*, 361).

Notes to chapter 5.

[1] Women writers mentioned positively by Niedecker include Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, H. D. and Mina Loy. Niedecker's library included the Peter Pauper edition of Dickinson's *Love Poems*, H. D.'s *Heliodora and Other Poems* (1924) and Marianne Moore's *Nevertheless* (1944) and *Complete Poems* (1967). Niedecker tried to get hold of some of Mina Loy's work, complaining that it did not seem to be available from the local library system, and writing to Jonathan Williams, "if you still have a copy of your publication of Mina Loy, would you have it sent to me? I've hardly ever seen her work, always made an impression, tho, when I did" (Letter to Williams, 3 Feb. 1963, Jargon).

[2] Niedecker's collection of books contained biographies of Margaret Fuller, Mary Shelley, and the three books on Dickinson mentioned on page 78. Additionally, Niedecker owned the journal of Katharine Mansefield and the memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell. There were also selections or collections of the letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Maria Rainer Rilke, and an edition of the Virginia Woolf-Lytton Strachey correspondence.

[3] In one letter Niedecker mentions, "Basil's very lovely but a bit disturbing statement: 'She is the best living poetess' ! Sometime I must tell Basil about Marianne" (Letter to

Williams, 29 Oct. 1968, Jargon), while in another she remarks, "Daphne Marlatt better than most poetesses (as Basil might term it) . . ." (Letter to Corman, 3 Dec. 1968, *Between*, 181).

Notes to chapter 6.

[1] The drafts of "The Very Veery" manuscript are held in the Mugar Memorial Library in Boston, along with "The Earth and its Atmosphere", another selection Niedecker made from her poems. The latter is dated 1969; both seem to have been made around the same period.

[2] Bertholf gives this poem in a different, presumably earlier form (*Condensery*, 125):

> In spring when the small fish spawn
> goes a boat along shore –
> someone scything grass?
>   Slippery
> Man.

"Spearing from a boat" replaces "scything grass" (but in the former Niedecker also retains, in a compressed form, "goes a boat along shore") perhaps to reinforce the connection between man and fish. Bertholf also gives another variation (*Condensery*, 131) from "The Earth and its Atmosphere", which cuts the dash after "Dusk" and replaces the upper-case "H" of "He's" with lower-case, thus increasing the syntactic compression further.

Notes to chapter 7.

[1] In the same letter to Zukofsky, shortly after making this remark Niedecker went on to say, "Going crazy over another that wants to come straight out of a recent experience – only time it works is when the emotion is so high the mind couldn't do anything but match it" (Letter to Zukofsky, 18 Dec. 1960, *Correspondence*, 271). It would seem that Niedecker was frequently inspired to write poetry by things "directly out of life", but was not always happy with the end product, especially if she considered it had too much biographical detail.

[2] See Thomas Jefferson, "Jefferson's Statement of Losses to the British at His Cumberland Plantations in 1781", 27 Jan. 1783, *Papers* vol. 6, 224; and the letter "To William Gordon," 16 Jul. 1788, *Papers* vol. 13, 363-4.

[3] See Jefferson, letter "To Martha Jefferson," 19 Mar. 1784, *Papers* vol. 7, 43; and letter "To Martha Jefferson," 28 Mar. 1787, *Papers* vol. 11, 250.

Notes to chapter 8.

[1] Although Bertholf mistakenly states (*Condensery*, 313) that in *My Life By Water* this poem is given in the form I have quoted, "There's a better shine", for all its popularity, has to my knowledge only been printed with this perfected spacing in Sturgeon's thesis edition.

[2] In this article Cox also makes the interesting suggestion that Niedecker may have intended to write "Paean to Place" in this form, but eventually gave up, leaving "My Life by Water" as a fragment of the abandoned project.

Notes to chapter 9.

[1] Quartermain's recent study draws a direct line from the poetry of Stein through Zukofsky to poets like Susan Howe. Unfortunately, his study does not discuss Niedecker in any detail.

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APPENDIX: Works Consulted.

For the reader's ease of reference, I include here works that have already been given in my list of "Works Cited".

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