

Lorine Niedecker, Henri Bergson and the Poetics of Temporal Flow

Dr Victoria Bazin, Northumbria University

Living for most of her life on the island of Black Hawk Wisconsin, close to where the Rock River empties into Lake Koshkonong, it is hardly surprising that water imagery saturates Lorine Niedecker's verse. The recurring images of spring floods, of water that "overflows the land," of leaky boats, marsh land, lakes and swamps reflects the experience of living in a place where the boundaries that secure location, that distinguish land from lake, are permeable.¹ Niedecker's lyric speakers are either figured as "floating" subjects or disfigured in the "wave-blurred/ portrait[s]" of a subjectivity unmoored.² These porous poems allow the past to seep into the present; memories merge with the experience of the present moment creating a temporal flow that dissolves the distinction between what is and what has been. This blurring of boundaries extends beyond the poetry to the fluid relations between art and social life, between the materiality of the poetic text and the textuality of material reality.

It is the exploration of time as it is experienced, of consciousness as process, of subjectivity as something pulled along by a temporal stream that suggests Niedecker's affinity with the modernist philosopher of time, Henri Bergson. Water imagery filters through the work of Bergson who is concerned with a "state of consciousness [that] overflows the intellect" and who describes experience in terms of a "stream of life."³ Writing to Zukofsky in 1955, Niedecker reveals that instead of socializing with neighbours she'll be staying at home "with potato salad, green beans and pork chops

¹ Jenny Penberthy, ed., *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 107.

² *Ibid.*, 193.

³ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1998), 200, 178.

and Bergson” whose *Creative Evolution* she is just getting around to reading.⁴

Niedecker’s own preoccupation with time emerges much earlier, however, when she grappled with writers as diverse as Engels, Diderot and Emerson: “Time is nuttin 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” she declares to Zukofsky in 1945.⁵ She read Wyndham Lewis’s *Time and Western Man* in 1958, a text that offered a critique of the modern philosophical reconceptualization of the temporal.⁶

The poetics of flow, I argue, might usefully be understood in Bergsonian terms as reflections of experience that fall outside what Bergson referred to as the “moulds of our understanding.”⁷ For Niedecker, a “life by water” is a life characterized by mobility and change; it is a form of becoming that poetic language can only tenuously grasp. Moreover, it is a “life” that is so fluid, so mutable and changing that it loses its integrity, it dissolves into the reflections it produces. Bergson’s understanding of art in relation to the flux of experience provides a way of understanding Niedecker’s autopoetics. As Mark Antliff suggests, for Bergson “the personality was decentred as the origin of creativity, [...], the organic form bore within it creative capacities that did not originate within the artist. To enter into intuitive relation to the self was, paradoxically, to dissolve self-presence.”⁸ Bergson’s psychology does not focus on the individual mind as a static entity but rather sees the “living being as above all, a thoroughfare,” a means of transmission that evolves into forms that cannot be fully

⁴ Jenny Penberthy, ed., “Lorine Niedecker: ‘Knee-Deck Her Daisies’: Selections from Her Letters to Louis Zukofsky,” *Sulfur*, 18 (1987), 110-151, 129.

⁵ *Ibid.* 112.

⁶ Penberthy, “Knee-Deck Her Daisies,” 134.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸ Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 12.

known as they do not yet exist.⁹ The intellect, compelled to use static forms to understand that which is by its very nature progressive, fluid and changing, treats life as a solid, concrete entity: According to Bergson:

Fabrication deals only with the solid, the rest escapes by its very fluidity. If, therefore, the tendency of the intellect is to fabricate, we may expect to find that whatever is fluid in the real will escape it in part, and whatever is life in the living will escape it altogether.¹⁰

It becomes necessary to seek ways of knowing that do not resolve or explain “real becoming,” forms of expression capable of illuminating consciousness as process. In order to resist the fabrication of the intellect, Bergson looks to “the fringe of vague intuition” which “settle[s] around” conscious perception.¹¹ It is the “aesthetic faculty” in its attempt to regain “the intention of life” that deploys intuition rather than intellect to release consciousness into the “current of existence.”¹²

Niedecker’s poetic language draws on peripheral experience, on the “fringes” of perception, on the mind as it wanders and evolves. For instance, the poem “River-marsh- drowse” suggests the movements of a mind as it lapses in and out of consciousness, of language as it seeks not to delineate but to immerse, to “flood” consciousness with the sonorous sounds of a “life by water.”¹³ Those who seek to commodify, who invest in the solid currency of the intellect such as bankers, live on “high land,” while those who rise from “marsh mud” develop a “weedy speech” commensurate with the “endless flow” of experience.¹⁴ Niedecker’s poetic speakers drowse or to borrow Bergson’s term, they “dream” allowing for a useful disintegration to take place. “[...] The self is scattered [...] broken up into a thousand

⁹ Bergson, 128.

¹⁰ Ibid., 153.

¹¹ Ibid., 49.

¹² Ibid., 167, 185.

¹³ Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 195.

¹⁴ Ibid., 170.

recollections made external to one another.”¹⁵ Subjectivity is not extinguished but rather disseminated or dissolved in a fluid conception of the relation between nature and consciousness.

Creative Evolution, published in 1911, confirmed Henri Bergson’s status on both sides of the Atlantic as the most widely known and influential philosopher of his time while also marking the moment when modernism turned away from the psychological. As Jesse Matz points out in a fascinating discussion of Bergson’s influence on T.E. Hulme, it was the French philosopher’s popularity and, in particular, his popularity among women that contributed significantly towards Hulme’s eventual dismissal of what he and others described as Bergson’s psychologism. Hulme went on to develop a classical, objective model for an understanding of aesthetic value, rejecting Bergson’s theories of “intuition” as too reductively bound up with the psyche. As Metz points out:

With that rejection, Hulme reorient[ed] modernism’s position with regard to the relation between art and the psyche. Initially, Bergsonism led Hulme to a belief in the artist’s unique psychological make-up; after Bergson, Hulme helped modernism to define the artist as someone able to transcend individual personality. To account for this shift is to explain how and why the anti-psychological impulse defined high modernism.¹⁶

And it might also explain how poets such as Niedecker found themselves on the margins of modernism rather than at its centre. This turn away from psychology was at least partly in response to the perception that Bergson’s philosophy valorized intuition, a feminized form of perception closely associated with the irrational. The crowds of women Hulme encountered at Bergson’s lectures seemed to confirm to him

¹⁵ Bergson, 201.

¹⁶ Jesse Matz, “T.E. Hulme, Henri Bergson, and the Cultural Politics of Psychologism,” in Mark S. Micale, ed., *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 339-351, 344.

that psychology and aesthetic culture were incompatible. The interior life of the psyche was treated with suspicion and to counter its feminising influences the extinction of personality became one of the dominant tropes of poetic modernism.

In this context, Niedecker's return to *Creative Evolution* suggests an attempt to recover an impulse that was blocked early in modernism's development. The poetics of flow, I would argue, is a recovery of modernism's original interest in psychology or rather, in what Bergson describes as "living thought."¹⁷ While Niedecker has frequently been characterized as the quirky outsider in the context of an Objectivist poetics already on the cultural margins, a fuller understanding of the philosophical impulse underpinning the poetics of flow suggests not only alternative readings of modernism but also a poetic genealogy that connects Niedecker to a number of post-war poets interested in what Robert Duncan described as the "urgent wave of the verse."¹⁸ A Bergsonian Niedecker points to the complexities of the post World War Two poetry scene problematizing neat divisions between open field proponents and those operating within the objectivist nexus. Niedecker occupies a place somewhere between these two positions, what might be described as a "no-woman's land" that has been overlooked in the context of the post-war poetry wars.

Placing the Woman Poet

It is perhaps because Lorine Niedecker is a poet who pushes against categorical boundaries that it has become difficult to place her (ironic given that she has been so closely associated with a particular regional identity). She has been most often linked to Objectivism due largely to her close relationship with Louis Zukofsky yet defining her as an Objectivist, as Heather White Cass suggests, has "preserved but also limited

¹⁷ Bergson, 128.

¹⁸ For a discussion of Niedecker's relation to Duncan see Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker's 'Paeon to Place' and its Reflective Fusions," in Patricia Willis, ed., *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 170-1.

her place in literary history.”¹⁹ The principle of condensation initiated by Pound in his Imagist manifesto in 1913 and taken up by the Objectivist poets is tempered in Niedecker’s work by the impulse towards fluidity and movement. While her pared down, elliptical poems have the hard-edged precision associated with William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky they also reflect her interest in the flow of experience as it falls outside conscious perception. Hence Niedecker’s interest in what she described as the “surrealist tendency,” a tendency that both Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Nicholls have traced in her poetry as a way of making sense of these complex and difficult poems.²⁰ The vital connection between Niedecker’s surrealism and her objectivism, I would argue, is the idea of mobility, the flow of consciousness reflected thematically and formally in Niedecker’s fluid poetics.

In other words, while Niedecker shared Zukofsky’s interest in the mind in motion, this led her in a different direction. As numerous critics have pointed out, though Niedecker read the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* and recognised her affinity with the principles Zukofsky outlined in his introduction, she sent Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry* her poem “When Ecstasy is Inconvenient,” an early experiment with surrealism. The friendship between Zukofsky and Niedecker lasted thirty-five years, much of their relationship being conducted through correspondence; they wrote weekly, sometimes more frequently but while they shared an objectivist commitment to condense they parted ways when it came to surrealism.²¹ Their correspondence

¹⁹ Heather Cass White, “‘Parts Nicely Opposed’: Lorine Niedecker’s Emerging Reputation,” *Western Humanities Review*, 59.1 (2005), 144-163, 144.

²⁰ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Lorine Niedecker, the Anonymous: Gender, Class, Genre and Resistances,” Jenny Penberthy, ed., *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1996), 113-138, Peter Nicholls, “Lorine Niedecker: Rural Surreal,” Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 193-217.

²¹ For detailed examinations of Niedecker’s early experiments with surrealism see Jenny Penberthy, “‘The Revolutionary Word’: Lorine Niedecker’s Early Writings 1928-1946,” *West Coast Line*, 26.1 (1992), 75-98; and Ruth Jennison, “Waking into Ideology: Lorine Niedecker’s Experiments in the Syntax of Consciousness,” Willis, 131-150. For an account of the brief affair between Niedecker and Zukofsky see Glenna Breslin, “Lorine Niedecker: Composing a Life,” in Susan Groag Bell and

reveals the extent to which Niedecker was always interested in exploring aspects of the unconscious, much to Zukofsky's disapproval. "Thank god for the Surrealist tendency running side by side with Objectivism" she wrote in a letter to her friend Mary Hoard in the mid thirties. She goes on:

I have said to Z [...] that the most important part of memory is its non-expressive, unconscious part. We remember most and longest that which at first perception was unrecognizable, though we are not aware of this. We remember, in other words, a nerve-sense, a vibration, a colour, a rhythm. [...] Along with this if anybody can possibly see the connection, I conceive poetry as the folktales of the mind and us as creating our own remembering.²²

Notably, Niedecker's use of the present continuous with the words "creating" and "remembering" points to her interest in the ways in which a collective memory actively shapes the past. DuPlessis picks up on this in her more recent work on Niedecker when she describes these folktales as "the characters, narratives, and idioms" that become "objective correlative[s] of states of her mind, part of the suggestiveness, the reflectives, the streaming, even the "surrealism" of the everyday – a key category."²³ The word "streaming" here indicates that what characterizes Niedecker's poetry is a concern with forms of experience that fall outside the processes of selection that frame conscious perception. This is a surrealism more akin to that practised by William Carlos Williams rather than André Breton as Peter Nicholls points out in his essay on Niedecker and the rural surreal.²⁴ Moreover, surrealism is a term that becomes increasingly inadequate as a description of exactly what Niedecker is after. Nicholls seems closest to defining this elusive impulse when

Marilyn Yalom, eds., *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 141-153.

²² Lorine Niedecker, "Local Letters," Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 88.

²³ Willis, 151-179, 160.

²⁴ Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 193-217.

he suggests that the poet's concern is to reflect the "mobility of mind," a description which has affinities with Bergson's fluid conception of consciousness.²⁵

Niedecker herself struggled to put this into words recognising the inadequacy of terms such as "abstract" and "metaphysical" even though she resorted to using them when trying to articulate her position.²⁶ By the sixties she was, in her own words, taking her "eyes from the minute [...] to the spatial," moving away from the miniature, elliptical style she had honed in the post-war years towards the longer, later poems such as "Paeon to Place" where, as Mary Pinard suggests, "Niedecker's writing often shows a surrealist's appreciation for the usurpations of the flood."²⁷ Here water imagery signals not only the literal (a life lived by water) but the figurative (the poem itself as a poetic stream). What Pinard refers to as a "grammar of flooding" Skinner describes as the "poetics of flow" identifying a linguistic loosening, a formally fluid non-objectivist pull away from the concrete materiality of the thing.²⁸ While these critical insights have informed my own understanding of Niedecker's poetry, the following discussion aims to shift the focus of attention away from the idea that language itself is fluid and instead to argue that for Niedecker, it is experience that is fluid. The poetics of flow is an attempt to make language more malleable, more flexible, more mutable in order to reflect forms of experience that fall outside the perceptual and conceptual categories that provide coherence and structure. This is a form of experience that might be usefully described in terms of temporal flow.

DuPlessis herself notes Niedecker's attention to "watery spots of time" and Michael

²⁵ Ibid. 213.

²⁶ Lisa Pater Faranda, ed., *"Between Your House and Mine": The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960 to 1970* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 185, 46.

²⁷ Mary Pinard, "Niedecker's Grammar of Flooding," in Willis, 21-30, 22.

²⁸ Jonathan Skinner, "Particular Attention: Lorine Niedecker's Natural Historie," in Willis, 41-59, 42.

Davidson refers to Niedecker's "localized perceptions" in terms of a "vital, sensate world in which time itself can be rediscovered."²⁹

Niedecker's description of Zukofsky's method in her critical review of 1955 suggests that what attracts her to his work is its desire to reflect the restless energy and vitality of life as it is experienced: "Zukofsky's greatest gift lies in transmuting events into poetry. The thing as it happens. The how of it happening becomes the poem's form."³⁰ Yet by the sixties, she is pushing against the perceived objectivist boundaries enshrined in Zukofsky's work suggesting the possibility of merging the subject with the object. By 1962, she is asking Zukofsky provocatively: "I wonder if we dare to close the gap someday – What we feel, see, inside us and outside us melted together absolutely."³¹ Closing that gap was daring in conceptual terms as Niedecker well knew; it was also daring in that it challenged Zukofsky's principles of condensation. Yet as I will suggest, Niedecker's preoccupation with temporal flow emerges directly out of the objectivist interest in the "object in process" and, in contrast to DuPlessis I argue that it underpins even those pared down, imagistic poems that initially appear to perfectly enshrine pure objectivist principles.³²

Time and Motion

The beginning of a critical consensus on Niedecker is now emerging thanks largely to the monumental endeavours of Jenny Penberthy who edited Niedecker's *Collected Works* in 2002 and made available to scholars material that had fallen out of print or remained unpublished. It is a consensus reinforcing the notion that Niedecker was an Objectivist poet, though one with reservations about Objectivist poetics; that she was profoundly interested in Surrealism in the 1930s and at the end of her career,

²⁹ Michael Davidson, "Life by Water: Lorine Niedecker and Critical Regionalism," in Willis, 3.

³⁰ Willis, 162.

³¹ Penberthy, "Knee-Deck Her Daisies," 146.

³² Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky* (London: Rapp and Carroll, 1967), 23.

though her definition of Surrealism was a capacious one that veered away from the European Surrealist movements of the 1920s and that her work has been neglected, marginalised due largely to the fact that she lived in rural poverty in Wisconsin, far from the literary metropole that operated to sponsor the work of avant-garde poets between the wars.³³ Finally, again largely because of Penberthy's edition of *Niedecker and the Correspondence With Zukofsky 1931-1970*, in recent years critics have reconsidered Niedecker's relationship with the central figure of the Objectivist movement, Louis Zukofsky. Rather than reading Niedecker as Zukofsky's disciple, critics have identified the mutually influential relationship between the two suggesting that Zukofsky profited in creative and intellectual terms as much from the connection to Niedecker as she profited from her contact with him.³⁴

Indeed, reading Niedecker in relation to an objectivist poetics broadens the parameters of what Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain describe as the "objectivist nexus." Thus if, as DuPlessis and Quartermain suggest, Objectivism is "a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics characterized by a historical, realist, anti-mythological worldview, one in which 'the detail, not mirage' calls attention to the materiality of both the world and the word" then the poetics of flow infuses the concrete edginess of this movement with a sense of something that resides just outside or beyond both the "world" perceived and the "word" as it describes that world.³⁵

Zukofsky's own interest in the relation between the object and time is evident from the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* published in 1931 which signalled the direction

³³ See for example, Marjorie Perloff, "Canon and Loaded Gun: Feminist Poetics and the Avant-Garde," *Stanford Literature Review*, 4.1 (1987), 23-46, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker, the Anonymous: Gender, Class, Genre and Resistances," Penberthy, ed., *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, 113-138, Heather Cass White, "'Parts Nicely Opposed': Lorine Niedecker's Emerging Reputation," *Western Humanities Review*, 59.1 (2005), 144-163.

³⁴ For a fascinating discussion of the surrealist influence in the early work of Zukofsky and Niedecker see Michael Golston, "Petalbent Devils: Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, and the Surrealist Praying Mantis," *Modernism/Modernity*, 13.2 (2006), 325-347.

³⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, eds., *Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 3.

modern poetry would be taking in the ensuing decades. In his introductory essay to that volume, Zukofsky mapped out a poetics that fused “movement” with “perfect rest” whereby the “image” was defined in terms of “duration.”³⁶ For Zukofsky, the poem is capable of “thinking with the things as they exist,” signalling with the use of the present continuous and in the small preposition “as” his interest in the poetics of flow.³⁷ Yet at the same time, acutely aware of the mediated nature of that world, of how it is always being processed by the mind, the objectivist poem foregrounds “construction,” a key term for Zukofsky. The poem, then, is “an object in process” as it reflects the mind as it moves, absorbs and shapes the world around it.³⁸ Charles Altieri succinctly summarizes this as “the mind’s act brought to objective form.”³⁹ The crucial difference, however, between Zukofsky and Niedecker was that for Niedecker language could not capture in objective form the experience of the continuous present or what Bergson would refer to as “durée.” As Robert Bernard Hass suggests in his Bergsonian reading of modern poetry, Pound and Zukofsky ultimately clung to a faith that the poetic image could provide a “visual analogue of the subjective forces that organize the stream of conscious experience” while for Frost and in the late work of Williams and Eliot, “the idea that every moment of consciousness is different from every other moment highlights the impossibility of the poet ever finding in language a fixed equivalent for ephemeral sensations.”⁴⁰ Niedecker, I would suggest, became increasingly drawn to the latter position.

This difference, however, is barely perceptible when analysing the relatively short, seemingly imagistic, poems such as “To my small/ electric pump” first

³⁶ Zukofsky, 21, 24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁹ DuPlessis and Quartermain, 32.

⁴⁰ Robert Bernard Hass, “(Re) Reading Bergson: Frost, Pound and the Legacy of the Modern,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29 1 (2005), 55-75, 62, 71.

published in 1964 in *Joglars*. This is one of many poems addressed to household appliances embodying the objectivist principle of creating poems that exist as part of the object world not as detached representations of that world. The compact efficiency of the electric pump operates like a “snifter valve” gradually releasing linguistic pressure in carefully controlled lines of no more than two words. That such control is required, suggests an awareness that language itself is capable of overwhelming the senses:

To my small
electric pump

To sense
and sound
this world

look to
your snifter
valve

take oil
and hum⁴¹

As Niedecker wrote to Cid Corman: “For me the sentence lies in wait – all those prepositions and connectives – like an early flood in spring. A good thing my follow-

⁴¹ Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 197.

up feeling has always been to condense, condense.”⁴² The dangers of the sentence, I would argue, is that by imposing grammar and syntax, language is subject to further constraint and therefore less able to reflect the fluid forms of experience that resist categorisation. The valve at the centre of the poem functions to regulate the flow of language, to ensure that it does not overwhelm or “flood” “sense and sound;” that it responds sensitively to “this” world *as* it is experienced rather than the world as it has been composed and arranged. To borrow a phrase from William Carlos Williams, the poem itself is a “machine made of words,” a delicate and precise mechanism capable of measuring, regulating and controlling the impulse to represent and categorise in language.⁴³ “The point of both objects” as Elizabeth Willis points out in relation to poem and pump, “is the transparency of their function, their well-oiled mechanics, their pleasing ‘hum’” thus revealing the design inherent in all objects, not only poems.⁴⁴ In other words, the objectivist poem signals not only its own constructedness but extends this awareness to the object world of which it is a part and, more crucially, the mind that is in the process of constructing it.⁴⁵

Thus to think of the electric pump only in terms of its efficient design misses the underlying preoccupation with the movement of the mind itself. As Jeffrey Peterson suggests, the idea of flow is linked to the subconscious in Niedecker. In his discussion of the slightly later poem, “To my pres-/sure pump” first published in *Poetry* magazine in 1965, he argues that, “the pivotal figure here is the fluid ‘jet,’ traceable through Niedecker’s poems and letters as an image of her work’s emergence, a trope

⁴² DuPlessis, “Lorine Niedecker, The Anonymous: Gender, Class, Genre and Resistances,” in Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 123.

⁴³ William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 256.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Willis, “The Poetics of Affinity: Lorine Niedecker, William Morris, and the Art of Work,” *Contemporary Literature*, 46.4 (2005), 579-603, 591.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the relation between objects and bodies in Niedecker’s poetry see Becky Peterson, “Lorine Niedecker and the Matter of Life and Death,” *Arizona Quarterly*, 66.4 (2010), 115-134.

of natural compression as much as technological ‘constriction.’”⁴⁶ Writing to Corman in 1966, Niedecker connected what she called her “subliminals” to a jet fast “spring” of creativity signifying forms of experience that fall outside our habitual categories of perception.⁴⁷ In the first stanza of this poem the speaker imagines herself as being free but this freedom is indeterminately located in temporal terms. Rather than using the past perfect the speaker uses the present perfect continuous to indicate something that started in the past but has continued up to the present moment. With the emphatic word “Now” that begins the second stanza, the experience of time becomes fixed or rather “bound” by the regulatory mechanisms that measure flow and in the final stanza the flow is reduced to what Niedecker refers to in another poem as a “deep/trickle”:⁴⁸

To my pres-
sure pump

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

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Peterson, “Lorine Niedecker: ‘Before Machines’,” in Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 245-279, 266.

⁴⁷ Faranda, 108.

⁴⁸ Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 195.

cost to my little

humming

water

bird ⁴⁹

It is the poem itself, figured here as “my little/ humming/ water/ bird” that pays the “cost” of regulation, intimating that too much precision, too much control reduces the “poetics of flow” to a tear-like drop. Thus what is suggested is a distance between the poem as a meagre drop and experience itself as a fluid, gushing flood of sensations. Too much concision, as Niedecker herself came to realise, could limit poetic language’s ability to tap into the stream of experience that exists on the edges of consciousness.

In other words, the poem is haunted by an awareness of something that falls outside the regulatory mechanisms that serve to make sense of the world. That something is the nothing conceptualised by Bergson in terms of time as it is experienced, or *durée*. This is a form of experience that is, by definition, difficult to access because it is unconscious. Moreover, it is characterised by movement, flow, by the “stream of consciousness” to borrow William James’s appropriately fluid term. The problem for the writer, as Tom Quirk explains in his discussion of Bergson’s influence on Willa Cather, is that language itself is not capable of reflecting reality as process:

Reality can never be adequately expressed in the rigid and static forms of symbols because symbols reify what is in its very nature a flowing. If we are to seek the real, then, as it lives in us and is perceived as change, we must by an effort of intellectual

⁴⁹ Ibid., 201.

“sympathy,” or intuition, immerse ourselves in this flux. Only by that means can we come to comprehend the real not as the made but as the being made.⁵⁰

The small verbal shards Niedecker wrote in the fifties before she began developing the longer, more fluid lyric poems of the sixties might be understood as attempts to reflect the real “as the being made.” Poetic fragments such as “Bird feeder’s/ snow-cap/ sliding off” is not an imagist poem; it seeks not to arrest the moment in time but rather to reflect the continual “sliding” of time. To cite a letter Niedecker wrote to Zukofsky in 1959, poetic language is “apropos of nothing,” it becomes a way of listening in on that which falls outside the signifying system that generates meaning.⁵¹ It becomes a means of tuning into “the folktales of the mind,” those patterns and associations that are not necessarily meaningful in semantic terms but that nevertheless reflect back to us a sense of how we experience the world. To return to Zukofsky again, the poet’s finely tuned ear picks up on “the range of difference and subtleties of duration” that reside at the lower frequencies.⁵²

The Something that is Nothing

Bergson’s theories of time, perception and his reconfiguration of boredom and impatience are particularly suggestive when read alongside the poem “What horror to awake at night,” where the slowness of time and the repetition and ritualistic pattern of daily life is thrown into relief. It is this sense of a heightened consciousness of temporality as it is experienced that points to a preoccupation with how to represent in words the continuous present or what Bergson refers to as *durée*. The poem was part of the *For Paul* series and Penberthy dates the manuscript September 1951:

⁵⁰ Tom Quirk, *Bergson and American Culture: The Worlds of Willa Cather and Wallace Stevens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1990, 47.

⁵¹ Jenny Penberthy, “Lorine Niedecker: ‘Knee-Deck Her Daisies’,” 135.

⁵² Zukofsky, 31.

What horror to awake at night
and in the dimness see the light,
Time is white
mosquitoes bite
I've spent my life on nothing.

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

I'm pillowed and padded, pale and puffing
lifting household stuffing –
carpets, dishes
benches, fishes
I've spent my life in nothing.⁵³

There have been several persuasive readings of “What Horror [...]” to date. For instance, Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes this as “one of [Niedecker's] fiercest poems” finding evidence of the poet's “rage” against her difficult social circumstances. For DuPlessis, the poem describes a life spent “‘on nothing’: on kinds of work that reduce to zero, poetry, and housework; and ‘in nothing’ – in a place and situation (poor land, strained relationships) that reduce one's status to nothing.”⁵⁴ Jane

⁵³ Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 147-48.

⁵⁴ Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 122.

Augustine in “What’s Wrong With Marriage?: Lorine Niedecker’s Struggle with Gender Roles” also suggests that this is a poem about a wasted life.⁵⁵ John Lowney has reinforced this particular reading identifying the “pain” of “devoting one’s life to household work,” but at the same time he points to a sense of “resolution” that suggests a more complex response to the everyday.⁵⁶ This interpretive shift, acknowledging as it does that the quotidian might amount to something worthy of attention, is also made by DuPlessis who identifies how “the poet sustains an attitude of wonder and readiness at the quirky holiness of the ordinary.”⁵⁷ It is this aspect of Niedecker’s poetry that tends to be lost in the desire to figure her work simply in terms of a resistance to her particular social circumstances. While Niedecker is attuned to the constraints of gender, I would argue that she is challenging the assumption that the routines of daily life are, in fact, nothing by redefining the concept of nothing.

Bergson’s refiguring of boredom and impatience suggests exactly how the nothing of everyday routine might prove useful as a means of accessing experiences hitherto invisible to the conscious mind. For Bergson, as Bryony Randall explains: “States of boredom, impatience and reverie reveal to the individual the passage of time as something which they do not merely ‘inhabit,’ but that unfolds with the unfolding of their subjectivity, wherein one can ‘do nothing more than be oneself.’”⁵⁸ Bergson’s fluid conception of experience as something continually being made, the notion of the present as actively created is reflected in Niedecker’s use of water imagery as we have seen, her “life by water” being deployed both to locate her as a

⁵⁵ Jane Augustine, “‘What’s Wrong with Marriage’: Lorine Niedecker’s Struggle with Gender Roles,” Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 139-156, 145.

⁵⁶ John Lowney, “Poetry, Property, and Propriety: Lorine Niedecker and the Legacy of the Great Depression,” *Sagetrieb*, 18.1 (1999), 29-40, 35.

⁵⁷ Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 131.

⁵⁸ Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 43.

subject and then to dislocate subjectivity as a fixed entity. The problem for both poet and philosopher is how to make perceptible the present moment as it unfolds. For Niedecker, the condensed, pared down poem gives shape to something half-felt, half-experienced. As she explains: “The visual form is there in the background and the words convey what the visual form gives off after it’s felt in the mind.”⁵⁹ The visual form is the residue of something not thought but intuited; it is inscribed by an experience that cannot be fully articulated through language. For Niedecker, this is the key to getting at an experience that has not been consciously registered and produces what Peter Nicholls describes in terms of “unfolding structures [...] patterned by sound and rhythm rather than syntax”; a form of writing no longer “shackled by the sentence.”⁶⁰

This poem, I would argue, offers a mock epiphany, a moment of enlightenment whereby what is perceived or felt is time unfolding. This is a conception of the temporal that challenges the illusion of time as homogenous and external to psychological experience. Instead, for Bergson, the inner experience of “real time” is, as John Mullarkey points out, “qualitative, heterogeneous and dynamic with no hint of predictability or linear determinism.”⁶¹ Time emanates from subjective experience and is, therefore, a process of constant “invention.” It is this awareness of the experience of time and subjectivity “unfolding” that seeps into Niedecker’s poem.

“What Horror [...]” attempts to follow a mind as it moves from one experience to another, from one feeling to another. It captures the tension embedded in the phrase “marking time” which, as Ben Highmore points out, “brings with it some of the flavour of everyday modernity in its ambiguous play on the literal process of ‘marking’ (differentiating, discriminating) and its everyday meaning of dull waiting,

⁵⁹ Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 212.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 194-95.

⁶¹ John Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 9.

of boredom.”⁶² In the first stanza, however, time is marked, consigned to clear categories, measured out with painful precision. The emphatic, masculine end-rhymes reinforce the idea of closure as each line snaps shut. Language itself seems incommensurate with the experience of duration unable as it is to capture and express the moment as it unfolds. Accompanying this language is a way of thinking that affirms this notion of a subject “spent,” of wasted years, of empty “white” time. In other words, a mechanical conception of time, externally imposed, reinforces the boundaries of a static and fixed subjectivity, one trapped by social circumstances.

In a shift of emphasis, the second stanza uses end-rhyme less frequently as it describes a life “sitting around,” of aimlessness and idle chatter. Here horror is replaced by irritation, the “buzz and burn” of a life lived by water, a life plagued by mosquitoes, a life full of minor irritants and inconveniences, a life that lacks drama. The emphatic end-rhymes are replaced by the sound “ing” in “stings,” “Nothing,” “Something,” and “sitting.” It is as if the poem is trying to capture the moment by changing tense, using the present continuous rather than the present perfect simple, the former tense suggesting that the poem is coterminous with the experience it describes. As Bryony Randall suggests, Bergson’s philosophy of time refers to the present in terms of verbs, of “becoming,” “being made,” and “gnawing” rather than as a static noun. Here Niedecker’s speaker lives a dull life, “sitting around with Something’s wife,” a life trapped in a never ending present continuous.

To reflect the “nothing” that constitutes the present moment requires, however, a good deal of energy. In the last stanza the frantic activity of household chores signals not ennui or boredom but vitality. The speaker is no longer in bed or “sitting around” but is instead, “pillowed and padded, pale and puffing.” Here the alliterative, plosive

⁶² Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 8-9.

“p” sounds emphasise the physical exertion required for ordinary domestic chores. Internal rhymes as well as end rhymes feature in an animated, busy stanza that attempts to record a life in motion, a life of activity. Also in evidence is the clutter, the stuff surrounding the speaker in her everyday life, the detritus of daily life that requires constant care and attention. Here is a poem about the routine chores, the endless and repetitive housework that cannot be avoided. The rituals of daily life are conveyed with Niedecker’s characteristic concision. Responding to “nothing” becomes a labour-intensive activity requiring a great deal of energy. A life spent on “nothing” is a life veering between moments of ennui and moments of explosive creativity. More fundamentally, however, this is a poem that looks at time itself as it is constructed mechanically. Time here is “spent” like a form of currency that can be weighed and measured and thus a life that is spent “on nothing” is a wasted life. But the shift in preposition at the end of the poem referring to a life spent “in nothing” registers a form of experience that cannot be measured because it is part of a stream or flow. Thus the last line suggests the experience of *durée*, a temporality uncharted where each moment is new and where consciousness is engaged in a dynamic and creative process of inventing itself. In other words, the poem gestures towards a vitality, an energy, a “life” that cannot be measured because it falls outside awareness. This is the “life” that generates the poem, the creative impulse that gives rise to new forms and that suggests that “nothing” is in fact something.

“Something Else”

It was not until the sixties that Niedecker began to articulate more freely and fully what amounts to a resistance to the poetics of objectification (this resistance having, as DuPlessis points out, something to do with her deteriorating relationship with

Louis Zukofsky).⁶³ Having read Clayton Eshleman's *Walks*, a collection she very much admired, she wrote to Cid Corman in 1968 that the poems were: "Good for me at this time since as you've surmised, I've been going thru a bad time – in one moment (winter) I'd have thrown over all my (if one can) years of clean cut, concise short poem manner for 'something else' (still don't know what to call it)."⁶⁴

Whatever that something else was, it was clearly something different from Zukofsky's idea of "the art form as an object" with his emphasis upon "shapes," and "structure."⁶⁵ While Niedecker was, as we have seen, preoccupied with the reflective mode, the mind in motion, towards the end of her career the emphasis became less on measuring the mind and more on simply releasing what I and others have described in terms of the flow of experience. The longer, looser limbed poems of the sixties signal Niedecker's commitment to the poetics of flow as a formal strategy. "Paeon to Place" written in the same year she indicated her new direction to Corman, is the poem that, ironically, goes to great lengths to suggest the fluid nature of place and the contingent nature of subjectivity. The geographical and temporal boundaries that keep place in its place are flooded by a consciousness that cannot be confined to one fixed location or one historical moment. Here the speaker adopts the familiar trope of floating to describe her relation to the watery world around her:

O my floating life

Do not save love

for things

Throw *things*

to the flood

⁶³ Willis, 166.

⁶⁴ Faranda, 153.

⁶⁵ Zukofsky, 23, 20.

Ruined

by the flood

Leave the new unbought –

all one in the end –

water⁶⁶

Unmoored, such poems reflect a Bergsonian sense of *durée*, of experience as a form of floating, of subjectivity as essentially fluid and even of things themselves, no longer retaining the concrete specificity of Objectivism but being thrown “to the flood.” If Niedecker’s interest in evolution extends beyond the Darwinian model to the Bergsonian one described in *Creative Evolution* then time itself “means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new.”⁶⁷ In other words, the poem is infused with a sense of time as something actively shaping life.

In “Paean to Place” location is flooded by time; the idea of a fixed geographical site is washed away in the flow of a consciousness in constant motion. It is not only a sense of place, however, that is immersed in this flow but the lyric speaker is also caught up in the stream of life. If the evolution from “fish” to “fowl,” what Jonathan Skinner refers to as the “mutability of species in time and place” is one of the subjects of this poem so too is the evolution of the mind itself as it absorbs the past into the present.⁶⁸ Memories wash against the shores of consciousness as Lake Koshkonong washed against the shores of Niedecker’s native Black Hawk Island. In particular,

⁶⁶ Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 268.

⁶⁷ Bergson, 11.

⁶⁸ Willis, 42.

sounds resonate in the ear producing what Rachel Blau DuPlessis refers to as a “sonic streaming” that signals the presence of the past as part of the flow of consciousness:⁶⁹

Paeon to Place

And the place

was water

Fish

fowl

flood

Water lily mud

My life

in the leaves and on water

My mother and I

born

in swale and swamp and sworn

to water⁷⁰

Niedecker’s characteristic use of sound is deployed here to trigger a Proustian *mémoire involontaire* stimulated not by the taste of a madeleine but rather by the aural echoes produced by words themselves. The memories that float to the surface of consciousness flow into the poem as one sound brings to mind another. Thus “flood” evolves out of “fowl” and then mutates into “mud” by the fourth line. The “l” and “m” sounds in “Water lily mud” are subtly re-invoked in the fifth line where the speaker refers to “My life” melding the characteristic features of the saturated

⁶⁹ Willis, 161.

⁷⁰ Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 261.

landscape with the contours of her experience. In addition to rhyme and alliteration, the six nouns that open the poem are allowed to float free of the parts of speech that anchor them to semantic meaning, throwing off, to refer back to the letter Niedecker wrote to Cid Corman, “the shackles of the sentence.” This resistance to “all those prepositions and connectives – like an early spring flood” signals a resistance to the gushy imprecision of language rather than the flow of life.⁷¹

Yet as DuPlessis points out, also embedded in these lines is an allusion to Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium”: “Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long/ Whatever is begotten, born, and dies”.⁷² DuPlessis goes on to explain, however, the goal for Niedecker is not a Yeatsian artistic transcendence:

She does not claim to sail to any exotic place, but to be within the place she is – the goal is saturation, not transcendence [...] for her the triumph lies in being precisely in nature and making a spiritual adjustment to its designs. This is more Darwinian than pious [...].⁷³

The question becomes, then, exactly how to be “in nature,” how to make that “spiritual adjustment” DuPlessis identifies in the speaker’s attitude to the place she inhabits. I would suggest that Bergson’s idea of *durée* provides an understanding of Niedecker’s poetics of place in time. The concept of time as the underlying current that produces life suggests the way in which the subject might imagine herself closer to “nature.” This might be understood simply in terms of an awareness of a form of experience that resides on the “fringe” of consciousness, one which is “unmasked for, unwanted” (CE, 49). Niedecker seeks to release the subject from the artificial constraints that are necessary though limiting by dissolving the differences that separate the subject from “life.”

⁷¹ Faranda, 33.

⁷² Willis, 167.

⁷³ Ibid.

Niedecker's objectivism might then be reconfigured in the light of Bergsonian time as the "creation of forms."⁷⁴ According to Bergson, art becomes one way of accessing this area of life that is so vital and yet so marginal:

The intention of life, the simple movement that runs through the lines, that binds them together and gives them significance, escapes [consciousness]. This intention is just what the artist tries to regain, in placing himself back within the object by a kind of sympathy, in breaking down, by an effort of intuition, the barrier that space puts between him and his model.⁷⁵

DuPlessis's description of Niedecker's goal of "saturation" might be usefully related to Bergson's understanding of the artist placing herself "back within the object by a kind of sympathy." In both cases, the subject is immersed in the flow or stream of experience resulting not in a Romantic identification or a modernist extinction of personality but rather a fusion of self and place that breaks down the categorical distinctions circumscribing both. In other words, rather than a poem that reflects a life in relation to a place, Niedecker produces a poem that suggests how the "intention of life" has no place and yet floods experience. DuPlessis points out that etymologically "paean" is derived from the Greek word "paiein" meaning to strike.⁷⁶ The blow or strike is, however, not only the emotional and financial blows experienced by the poet herself but the blow struck to the concept of a located subjectivity.

Location is not only geographically indeterminate but temporally vague. To paraphrase Bergson, memory does not consign the past to a drawer but rather ensures that the past is continually present, "pressing against the portals of consciousness that

⁷⁴ Bergson, 11.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 177.

⁷⁶ Willis, 166.

would fain leave it outside.”⁷⁷ This becomes particularly evident when the speaker thinks of her deaf mother locked in a world of silence:

I mourn her not hearing canvasbacks
their blast-off rise
from the water
not hearing sora
rails’ s sweet

spoon-tapped waterglass-
descending scale-
tear-drop-tittle
Did she giggle
as a girl?⁷⁸

The sounds of bird song, the musical cacophony of the speaker’s natural environment filters into her awareness not only of what her mother missed but also of her missing mother. Filling the silence, she mimics the call of the native birds of Black Hawk Island but by doing so, inadvertently finds herself attuned to other echoes that linger on the edges of consciousness. The sora rail’s song flows into the sound of sobbing, the “tear-drop[s]” fuse with the “sweet/ spoon-tapped” trill of the bird. The question that closes the stanza, “Did she giggle/ as a girl?” suggests, through the gurgling, brook-like babble of ‘g’ sounds, both the possibility of pleasure as well as its absence.

⁷⁷ Bergson, 5.

⁷⁸ Penberthy, *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, 263.

Clearly on one level, Niedecker's poem engages with the nature of memory, of loss and mourning and while this part of the poem in particular is steeped in a sense of sadness, I would suggest that it might be read not only as a reflection of a life or indeed overlapping lives but also, in a Bergsonian sense, as a reflection of the ways in which life itself exceeds the categories that define experience. The synthesis of sounds in the poem, the merging of the mother/daughter figure, the confusion between the giggle and the sob are strategies deployed to resist the human impulse to think in spatial terms. Thus space or in this instance, place creates a "barrier" which must be broken down by "an effort of intuition." These "reflective fusions" attempt to recover experience before it has been put into categories or, to borrow a trope from the poem itself, before it has been placed. The poetics of flow seeks to keep everything moving for at least the duration of the poem so that the reader, pulled along by the current, is kept in perpetual motion, moving along this poetic "stream," experiencing "the sloughs and sluices" of a floating subjectivity.⁷⁹

While Niedecker has been difficult to place as a poet, this may have something to do with modernism's turn away from psychology. Niedecker's work looks out of place in the context of an institutionalized modernism dominated by the ideology of aesthetic immunity and the trope of impersonality. Recovering Bergson's influence via Niedecker's poetry, not only proves useful as way of conceptualising the poetics of flow, it also hints at currents within modernism itself that have been obscured by the dominant discourses framing modernist aesthetics. A fluid, more capacious modernism emerges in the post-war period if a place is found for Niedecker's particular contribution to the objectivist nexus.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 269.

