

LORINE NIEDECKER: THE POET IN HER PLACE

DAVID WILK

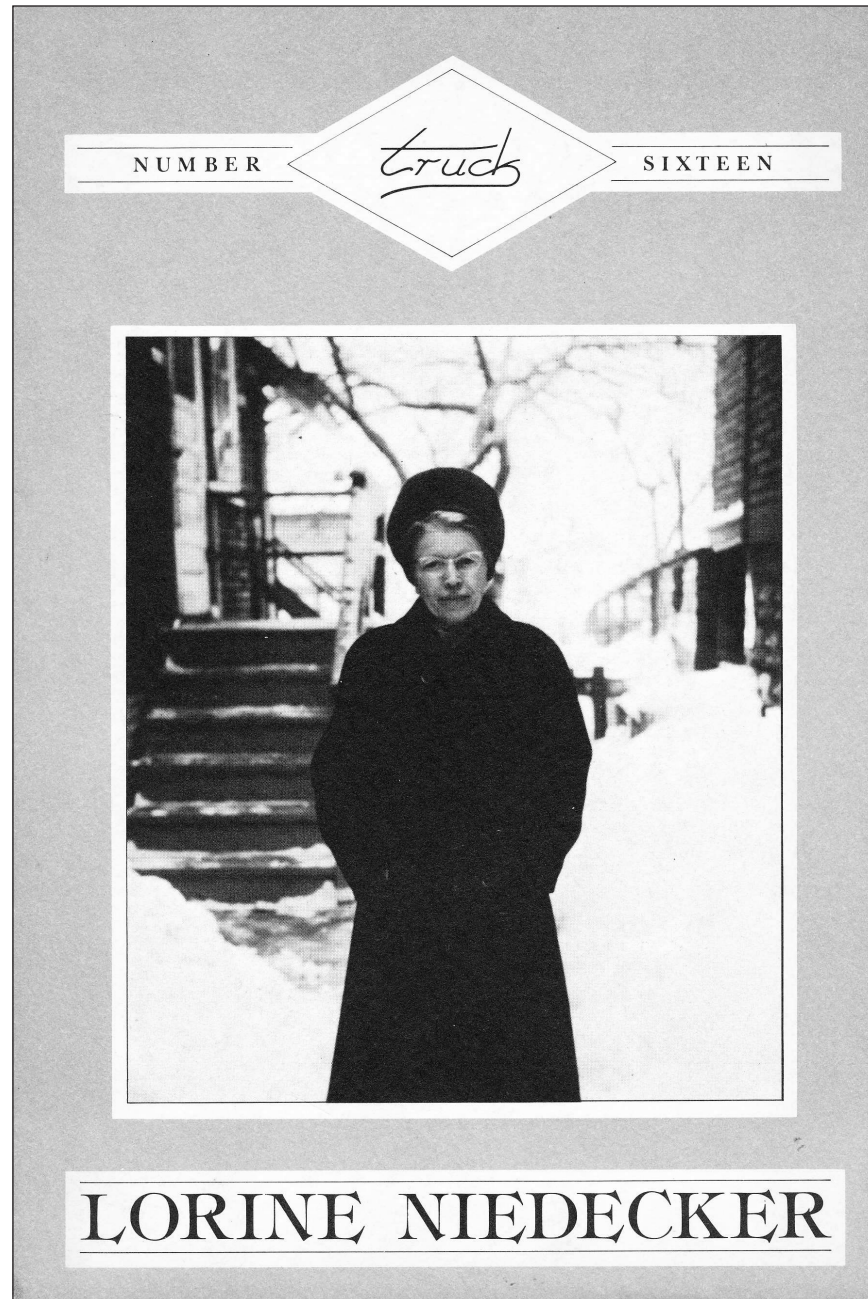
Connecticut and Wisconsin, 2015-2016

I've been reading Lorine Niedecker's poetry for more than 40 years now. I never tire of her work, and continue to discover new elements in her writing, as my readings continue over time. And of course the literal context of reading Lorine Niedecker is completely different today than it was when I first came to her work so many years ago.

That context will continue to change for me and others, as our understanding of Lorine's work changes over time.

A bit more than 40 years ago, I put together the 16th issue of *Truck*, a literary journal I then edited and published. *Truck* 16 was dedicated to the work of Lorine Niedecker, who was, at that time, still relatively unknown to most readers.

The cover of
TRUCK 16.



A little background on how that occurred.

In November, 1973 I moved from northern Vermont to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, knowing almost no one anywhere in that area. I'd been writing poetry, publishing *Truck*, which I had co-founded in 1970 as a sophomore at Yale with poet friends Kit Robinson, Steve Benson, Michael Waltuch, and a few others. I'd been editing the magazine by myself since 1971, and was transitioning *Truck* from a small circulation handmade mimeo magazine to something a bit more solid. Beginning with issue #12, I began producing subject-oriented issues.

The closest model for what I wanted to *Truck* to be was *Io*, a literary journal published by Richard Grossinger and Lindy Hough, who were then teaching at Goddard College in Vermont.

At that time, my interests tended toward the Black Mountain poets, principally Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, the San Francisco poets Robert Duncan, Michael McClure, and Jack Spicer, and others of that group, including Gary Snyder, Ken Irby, and Diane DiPrima, alongside a growing passion for understanding ecology and the natural world, integrating nature and its expression as art, which had led me to a wide variety of writers and visionaries in literature and ecology.

My immediate goal then was to read as much and as widely as possible, toward finding my own voice, and hopefully a path to becoming a writer and editor.

Having landed in the foreign country that was North Carolina, it did not take long for me to seek out Jonathan Williams, poet and founder of the Jargon Society, who with his life partner, poet Tom Meyer, was living most of each year in the western mountains of North Carolina, in the relatively isolated community of Scaly Mountain, in a home his parents had purchased some years earlier.

Jonathan had been a student at nearby Black Mountain College,

and had studied there with Charles Olson, Edward Dahlberg, and many other now well-known figures. As a young poet and photographer, he had joined the Army in 1951, and stationed in Germany, started publishing his own and the work of other poets and artists, who in years to come would turn out to be among the greatest of our era, including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Louis Zukofsky, Michael McClure, Kenneth Patchen, Denise Levertov, and so many others.

Jonathan's Jargon Society was a truly incredible literary endeavor. While constantly struggling for money and attention, it was an unwavering example of Jonathan's commitment to his many literary and artistic passions. He was a wonderfully generous man, whose life was dedicated to poetry, art, photography, and music, particularly of the individualist and iconoclastic, and to sharing his literary, artistic, and musical enthusiasms with audiences wherever he could find them.

For me then, Jonathan became an invaluable mentor and guide to writing and publishing as artistic practice.

Sometime in 1974, on one of my visits to Scaly Mountain, Jonathan handed me a stack of Jargon Society books that I took home to read. One of those books was Lorine Niedecker's *T&G, Tenderness and Gristle*. It was all of 70 pages and was subtitled "The Collected Poems of Lorine Niedecker."

I still remember reading this book, and being immediately taken with the writing. Hers was a voice and a writing style I felt I had simply never experienced before. In the context of that book, Lorine's work was a revelation, and literally changed my life.

As I have thought about my readings during that time, I am almost certain that I would have at least come across Lorine's work in *Stony Brook* magazine, in Clayton Eshleman's *Caterpillar*, and elsewhere. If so, I might have read her work, but perhaps not truly felt the words on the page. Sometimes discovery must wait for its time.

What's interesting to me now is that I had felt much the same

instantaneous response to Charles Olson's writing a few years earlier, when introduced to his work by Richard Grossinger, Chuck Stein, and George Butterick. Olson's charged energy, the open line, the expansive vision of what a poem could be captured my imagination very early in my poetic readings.

Olson and Niedecker are certainly far apart aesthetically and perhaps spiritually, but there are some compelling congruencies between them.

And there are also distinct similarities—their deep readings in American history, in natural history, mark their work; each was thinking about the role of the poet and carried the utter willingness to sacrifice everything for the words. Each took the Poundian approach to history, transforming historical record into poetic language and form. While Olson's vision was of salt water, with the East Coast's land mass adjoining the sea, and Niedecker's was of the marshy landscape of Wisconsin, where the boundaries of water and earth are merged, the people living on the land matter deeply to both of these 20th century visionaries.

For me, as a young poet seeking my own path, trying to discover my own voice and to acquire a personal vision, the desire and effort was always to find those voices that vibrated distinctively, and to be inspired by them.

When I first discovered Niedecker's writing, I felt immediately drawn to her sharply shaped language, and to her persona as a poet. That current was literally powerful—here was work that revolved around a specific place connected to a literary imagination whose vision produced a singular voice.

As a then-23-year-old, who had grown up in a more or less typical suburban environment in the fifties and sixties, influenced by the counter-culture, those voices who came before and expressed the deep connection to actual geographical and spiritual places were

specifically inspiring. In a nomadic, disconnected world, the rootedness of Niedecker’s work called out to me.

At the same time, it was doubtlessly a certain bit of romanticism on my part to view Niedecker as one of the “true” poets. She was a woman who built a life around her art, made the necessary moves to always be in the place she loved, doing the work that mattered most to her. I believed that she had sacrificed and suffered for her commitment to “the work.” At that time, I knew little of her personal life, though Jonathan and later Cid Corman told me what they knew about her life story, how and where she had lived, and taught me something of what had influenced and shaped her writing life.

Niedecker’s poetic relationship to Zukofsky was clear—and his poor treatment of her, as well, as I saw it. My interest, as the editor of *Truck*, reflected the enthusiasms and concerns of my own writing. Thus, the subject matter of each issue of the magazine generally related to the ideas and work I was exploring.

As editor, I was not interested in simply collecting poetry and publishing around an aesthetic. Instead, I wanted each issue of the magazine to be focused on a specific concern that would push ahead the ground of work, where the writing was organized around a core idea that could move a discourse forward for its readers.

Producing a single issue devoted to Lorine Niedecker’s writing made sense in this context. Having fallen hard for her poetry, I wanted to share what was for me a significant discovery.

In 1975, Lorine Niedecker was relatively little known, her books either out of print or difficult to locate. I was moved by the fact that she had passed away before I even knew she existed. I had felt similarly about Olson, whose work I had begun to explore only the year of his death. And ironically both Niedecker and Olson died during the same year, Olson on the tenth day, and Niedecker on the last day of 1970.

I felt that by gathering a meaningful range of writing about

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Lorine into a single book length magazine issue, I could help in some way to broaden awareness of the work that had been so thoroughly neglected by so many.

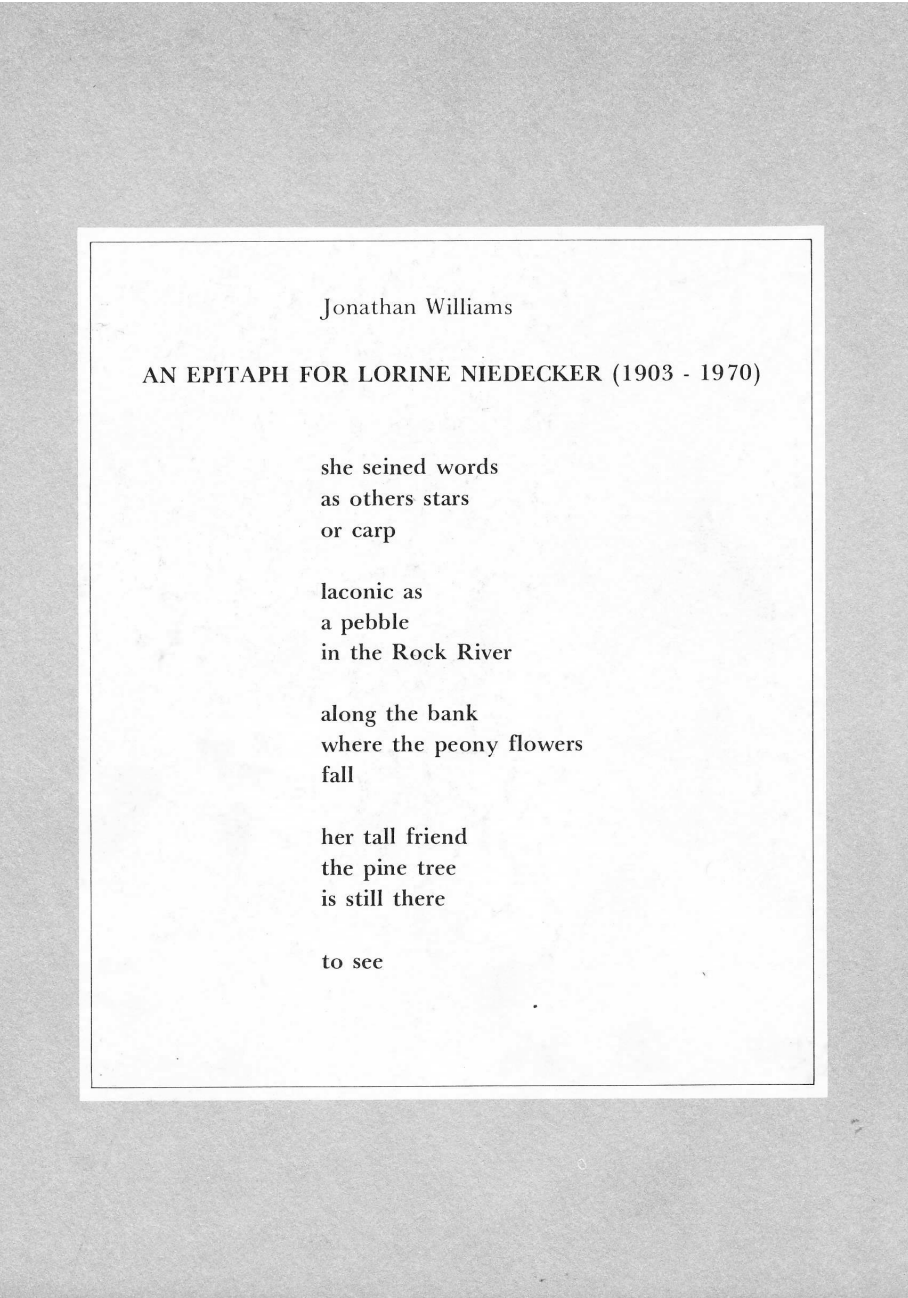
It was principally Jonathan Williams and Cid Corman who guided me to those few writers and critics who knew about Niedecker and who had something to say about her work. And furthering my understanding of the breadth of Niedecker’s work only served to increase the sense that I had “missed” her despite what I believed to have been a broad and inclusive reading of modern poetry. Some of the contributors to *Truck 16* were writers I knew already, but most were new to me, and all of them significantly increased my own understanding of Lorine’s writing.

Looking back at that effort today, I do wish that I had invited more women writers to contribute to the Niedecker issue of *Truck*, and to establish a less male-centered, and thus more comprehensive view of her work. But overall, I am happy with the outcome of that issue, and have been grateful for the subsequent work of so many poets and scholars, who have furthered my understanding of Lorine’s work and life beyond the rudimentary view I had so many years ago.

Jonathan Williams was one of the great connectors, generous with his time and his energy, always seeking out original voices he felt needed to be heard. His list of discoveries and enthusiasms is long and strikingly diverse. Similarly, Corman was always a supporter of the poets he thought were worthy, and who needed to be read.

Jonathan and Cid were my guides, leading me to almost everyone then still living who had known Lorine as a poet, or who had read her work deeply, or written about her work in print. I sought them out, in some cases making connections to writers and poets whose own work in turn became important to me.

I really felt then that publishing an entire issue of *Truck* devoted to Lorine Niedecker would be an important contribution to



“An Epitaph for Lorine Niedecker” by Jonathan Williams, from TRUCK 16.

literature. My goal was simply to bring her work to the attention of more readers.

I've been thinking a lot about Lorine recently, having had the opportunity to participate in the 2015 Lorine Niedecker festival in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.

Lorine's life and her work are a challenge to the trend in modern art and writing that moves toward the social and away from the individual.

My friend Jonathan Williams' life work was the discovery and preservation of the truly individual, the outsiders in art and literature, and culture in general, those individuals who do not follow any movement or the dictates of official art.

Lorine Niedecker is so clearly one of these originals. Her life as a poet is completely outside our expectation of how a modern life should be lived.

That life is in so many ways contradictory. She lived deeply in and of a specific place in Wisconsin. But the intellectual interests she pursued ranged far afield throughout her life.

She was prototypically American. She was an individualist engaged in the local, her locale, as a form of engaged community. She was no less big a thinker than Olson. But she lived and wrote without that kind of bluster, was in fact self-effacing to an extreme degree, yet indelibly strong, as the granite underpinning the land.

It's crucial to not allow the notion of someone being rooted in a place to diminish a full sense of her vision and identity. An outsider, yes, but one who was speaking always to her understanding of a literary tradition. She was not alone, isolated, or indifferent to the literary discourse, even as she was writing deeply about the specific place in which she lived, the people around her, the ideas in her mind.

Olson wrote essays and poems of expansive scope, traveled widely, participated in politics (the *polity* as he called it), was "a man of the world," and was known for his social appetites and expansive mind.

Niedecker wrote letters, and poems carefully crafted, observed details of the people and environment around her, made only occasional sojourns outside the place where she was born, raised, lived and died, worked menial jobs her entire life, appearing to be a poet of the mundane and a woman bounded by expectations and a so-called small life (her *condensery*).

But hers was never a small life.

Contrast these statements:

Olson:

"this
is the abstract, this
is the cold doing, this
is the almost impossible"

Niedecker:

"I rose from marsh mud
algae, equisetum, willows,
sweet green, noisy
birds and frogs."

Both Olson and Niedecker had prodigious minds, studied and interpreted the work of many writers and scientists outside the sphere of poetry and prose. Each held strong opinions about what was right for a poet to write and indeed, how to live as a writer in the world. And each engaged in long, intellectually stimulating correspondences with other writers.

It's impossible to view Lorine's life and poetry outside of a feminist lens. We must acknowledge now the importance of reclaiming Lorine Niedecker's poetic and personal agency. We must recognize and value her struggle as a woman writer and thinker to be her own person in a male dominated poetry world in the early to middle twentieth century. And how that struggle continues for other writers

even now. Such an awareness will enable us to appreciate the scope of her accomplishments, and the beauty of her writing all the more.

Beverly Dahlen wrote this about Lorine:

It is ironic that Niedecker's work, as H.D.'s, has often been reduced to a simplistic version of small perfections, whereas the work proves to be tenacious, sinewy, not merely gem-like—a persistence of mind which finds its constant focus in the natural and domestic world.

I started this piece by saying that I've been reading and thinking about LN's work now for over 40 years. I never tire of reading her poems. I think of them as familiar stones I can hold in my hand, whose contours I can caress, hearing them with my fingers. Her poems still surprise and delight, their meanings change and evolve over time.

I feel similarly about some other poets, all of whom I cherish, William Carlos Williams, Creeley, Ginsberg, Olson, Susan Howe, Maureen Owen, Jerry Rothenberg, Nate Mackey, Lyn Hejinian, CD Wright....

Most of us will remember being told in school that greatness in art and literature can only be tested over time. Universality lies somewhere in the best poems that speak to readers across many experiences, many lifetimes.

Today, Lorine might like to know that for many of us, her work is far more important than that of her erstwhile heroes.

Mary Oliver wrote: "Poetry is a product of our history, and our history is inseparable from the natural world."

That reminds me and takes me back to my interest in Niedecker's work, and how I saw it then; how I still see it today.

We might think about current—electricity—how the positive and negative poles make connection, current flows. "I sing the body electric."

The Olsonian concentration on breath and expansiveness, of imagination driving the poet's voice, and the Niedecker/Creeley care for condensation, units of measure, what the eye sees, are directly connected in this way.

At the time I first began to read Lorine's work, I found that I began to write differently, to imitate her style, writing short poems, cutting lines, as I was trying to be as taut in my language as possible. Reading Niedecker repeatedly, I am inevitably drawn to her careful, singular parsing of words and the purposefulness of words specifically placed together or apart, how they sing and vibrate against each other across the spaces that supposedly separate them.

That is what makes great poetry: it is the vibrations of words from which the music is made.

I've come to believe in poetry as a kind of dictation. It is all about listening. What Niedecker wrote came absolutely from her way of listening to the words, the songs they made in her ear.

We can see in her careful construction, her dedication to condensing, that she is literally listening to the poem as she hears it, then trying to get it on the page as closely to the mind's ear as she can.

I don't see a contradiction between the concepts of condensing and dictating. Taking poems in dictation from the "aether," there is the sense that one is hearing the poem—the poet must first try to let it come through, but then must go back, begin to rehear it as it really was dictated, because the ego is so often getting in the way of the recording of what was actually heard.

The poet's goal must be to remove one's ego from the process, to allow the words to play off each other. This effort requires tremendous time and attention. That is precisely what makes Lorine's work so impressive, that she was always, was constantly willing to spend the time to get it right, to hear clearly, to record the truth. §

DAVID WILK IN CONVERSATION WITH KARL GARTUNG

WOODLAND PATTERN BOOK CENTER, MAY 12, 2016

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

DAVID WILK:

Karl wanted me to talk a little bit about how *Truck*, how [*Truck* 16—the Lorine Niedecker issue] came about. I did talk about that last year in Fort Atkinson so I won't belabor it. I've been, actually, ever since trying to remember who it was who introduced me to Jonathan Williams because I cannot remember. I'm going to guess that it was through Richard Grossinger, most likely. In the early seventies I discovered Charles Olson and the Black Mountain poets. I was at Yale and, Olson when he died, there was a memorial for him at Wesleyan College in Middletown, Connecticut. That was

like a major event that I had missed, or I felt that it was major, that I had missed that Olson was gone and I didn't know who he was and just learned about him too late. Anyway, I think that I moved to North Carolina in 1973, I lose track of the years but I think it was in the fall of 1973. North Carolina was not exactly a poetic landscape, let's put it that way. There were not too many poets there that anybody would be interested in. Aside from Chapel Hill, and Durham, which is where I spent most of my time, it just wasn't very welcoming to poetry.

There was Jonathan Williams in Western North Carolina in a little town called Scaly Mountain, which is a community, not even a town, near Cashiers, literally on the border with Georgia. You'd look out of his house on the Nantahala Mountains. It was just a gorgeous place, really beautiful. I know that I was introduced to him and I assumed that I made this pilgrimage out to meet him because he was connected with Black Mountain and Olson, and had known Olson and all these people whom I revered—Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Michael McClure, all published by Jonathan and the Jargon Society. You can go online and find the bibliography of the publications of the Jargon Society. It's an extraordinary list.

I guess that what we want to talk about here is not so much *Truck*, the issue of the magazine that I published, but how important Jonathan Williams is, since we're talking about how you find something, the lineages of how poets have been kept alive or discovered. I think about Jonathan a lot, because he was so motivated by his own enthusiasms and his own sense of what was important. He spent his entire life seeking out the obscure, if you will, and the people no one else really knew about. He did publish the first Charles Olson *Maximus Poems* in 1953. He published Zukofsky, and he published Robert Duncan, and he published Michael McClure. Those are all people that we know about for other reasons maybe, but their

poetry because of what he did. He also published people that you've never heard of still or may never have heard of, who are still obscure, like a guy named Mason Jordan Mason [and Alfred Starr Hamilton]. No one knows who they were.

Although, Alfred Starr Hamilton just had a big book published, edited by Geof Hewitt [*A Dark Dreambox of Another Kind*, edited by Ben Estes and Alan Felsenthal, introduction by Geof Hewitt (The Song Cave, 2013)], that is just an amazing collection. Jonathan championed him. He championed Russell Edson, who is also kind of neglected. Mina Loy, famously I think. I found this piece about ... I was actually reading in the Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet National Poetry Foundation anthology ... No, this was in Jacket. I don't know whether you've seen Jacket, this online magazine from Australia. A guy named Kyle Schlesinger wrote this little summary of Jonathan in that. They did an issue on Jonathan Williams a couple years ago, which, in fact, I'm going to publish as a print book, printed anthology, next year, edited by Jeffery Beam and Richard Owens.

Williams stayed true to the integrity of private press culture (spawned by William Morris and his Kelmscott Press in the late 1800s) by making it his business to publish the poets he wanted to read in the form that he wanted to read them regardless of their commercial viability. While there were deluxe editions from time to time, these were the exception rather than the rule. It seems likely that these were primarily designed to be sold to special collection libraries and private collectors in order to raise money for the press's populist publications. One of the characteristics most often admired in The Jargon Society is the unique design, uncompromising manufacturing standards, and use of

high-quality (not extravagant) materials—not sumptuous, just well made. Williams claimed to have lost money on almost every book he published, (which is true) and relied on the support of grants from individual benefactors and organizations to keep afloat. The range of poets and artists whose energy and ideas gained the support and admiration of Williams is staggering.

I think that's actually true. He spent his entire life raising money to promote this work. He championed outsider art, not just poetry. He did the book with Tom Patterson on outsider art that's still one of the critical texts. He just loved the strange, the unusual, the people whose work was outside of the mainstream. That, I think, he felt signified how terrible American culture was, that we could not recognize the work of people who really were magnificent, because the mass culture is so consumed with the mundane. In a funny way, Jonathan was not in any way a populist, but had a strong sense that he was finding the work that really meant something. The irony is that he celebrated the populist and the mundane in the sense he put quotations marks around those two words, but in a way to make them special; to recognize their specialness. I thought that was pretty interesting.

The reason that I knew about Lorine Niedecker was because Jonathan handed me a pile of his books one day. In the same way that Karl, you say that reading *Truck* was a major event for you, reading *T&G* was a major event for me. I realized also when I was reading through the *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet* book that Morgan Gibson, who was important to her and had lived in Wisconsin and had corresponded with her in the early sixties—I actually knew him before I met Jonathan. I met Morgan in Vermont in 1972/1973. Maybe he told me, I can't even remember, maybe he told me about Lorine. It is entirely possible. My memory

is that it was Jonathan, but it's very likely that I had read Lorine's work earlier and it just hadn't hit me the way that context of *T&G* was able to do.

KARL GARTUNG:

Morgan actually was responsible for bringing Jonathan to Milwaukee to do one of his slideshows at which Jonathan introduced Lorine to the audience, many there had no notion of who she was. Though that was not the case for Karl Young, John Shannon and Bob Nero (who brought her to the reading). Niedecker refers to that occasion in a letter to Cid Corman, musing being able to live in such select company, "now isolate dots on the map again." So Gibson had a lot to do with introducing Niedecker to Milwaukee. I'm sorry to interrupt.

DAVID WILK:

No, that's all right. The other thing that I realized is that *Stony Brook* published *My Life by Water*—the magazine *Stony Brook*. That was George Quasha's magazine, which I had been reading also. I must have been exposed to Lorine's work before *T&G*.

KARL GARTUNG:

And Clayton Eshleman published "Wintergreen Ridge" in *Caterpillar* about that same time.

DAVID WILK:

She was beginning to be read, I think, in that era. I have been thinking about how Lorine and Olson are connected. I had this idea that you could talk about them together because of the notionality of water being so important to both of them. Lorine was about fresh

water and the boundaries of rivers and lakes. Olson's water is the Atlantic Ocean and looking east out from Massachusetts back out over the ocean to Europe and vice versa. We think of Olson as being, because he was gigantic, he was 6' 8", and Lorine was small—

KARL GARTUNG:

5' or 5'2"?

DAVID WILK:

Yeah. An amazing sort of interesting comparison. His bigness, her smallness. His interest in the breadth and the largeness of line—lines going out into space. And hers about condensation and making lines as short as possible to use the fewest most perfect words to describe what she's seeing. Olson would be completely different. What's really interesting to me is that they are connected principally through Ezra Pound. Olson was a Pound reader and acolyte and through either William Carlos Williams or Zukofsky, so was Lorine. They both came at a similar kind of place, but thinking about it really differently. The thing I found from Pound is that he demanded that we create a poem containing history.

KARL GARTUNG:

We have a little bridge here, which we can hear from Olson. We'll hear "Song 3" that's in the first volume of *Maximus* that Jargon Press published, which there's a copy in the back to look at. Then we'll hear two poems from Niedecker. Unfortunately, the one short recording of hers that we have doesn't contain *My Life by Water*. I'd probably cut some digits off to hear the way she spoke it. Then David is going to talk from the Olson angle and I'll talk from the Niedecker angle. That's the program here.

[recordings of Olson reading “Song 3” and Niedecker reading “Foreclosure” and “Darwin” are played]

KARL GARTUNG:

Niedecker, actually at the end of her life, turned oceanic.

DAVID WILK:

You can start with “Darwin.”

KARL GARTUNG:

“Darwin.” I’m extremely impressed that the very last words that anybody has from her were, they were left at Gail Roub’s mailbox on Blackhawk Island Road, the typescript to “Darwin” was left there. The poem’s last line is “Let each man hope and believe what he can.” That moves me greatly.

DAVID WILK:

Well, I actually have more to say about Lorine than about Olson. Even so, I thought I would do two things. I’m going to read this from an interview with Charles Olson that Gerard Malanga did. It was published in the *Paris Review*. They did these interviews with writers every issue. I think Gerard went up to Gloucester where Olson was living and kind of ambushed him sometime in the late ’60s.

He asked a lot of really good questions and this was about Pound. Olson said,

To tell you the truth, I think both Pound and Eliot were after something rather different than us who came a little later, like myself, hip hip hip. All that matters is that the thing be the thing of the thing—a cool thing

which is like a river for the tiger of the river. To say it in language is like hard as hell. The greatest poetry profile that was made this side or the other side of the Atlantic Ocean is called the anacreontic award and I hereby now make it and it’s pre-amanquiantic and it is absolutely way down below Atlantis and it has got no end, no end because it is like the stock of heaven and creation and it hasn’t even been booed or had a crown yet, but it exists. And I know where it’s playing—and I know where it is planted and I know where it is and we all do too, and we all know what we’re talking about, because it is down on the plantation under the trunk of that large cypress tree in all that goo way down there in that rain swamp ...

No better contrast than what you read of Niedecker, I think. Olson was literally in a completely other place than Lorine, but I still think it’s really interesting to think about them together. We always talk about in the American tree. It’s the poetry trying to figure out where everybody fits in, what their influences are, and who they come from. I go back to the Pound line, “To create a poem containing history.” To me, that is the conjunction of the work of Olson and Niedecker. For Niedecker, perhaps via Zukofsky, but the term fits the work of both.

He’s gigantic (this is Olson), gigantic, expansive, oceanic, searching history with a romantic fervor to establish his being in almost Hellenic vision of the earth, sailing out to sea like Odysseus, facing east looking out from the safety of land over water to the visions beyond, which is what actually he just said in that quote.

She is smaller physically, examining with great care the physical and social world around her, searching for meaning in, of, and through her experience of life and mind, her life by fresh water, river, lake, marsh, the boundaries of land and water where all life begins. Each

was engaged in a similar practice—the poetics—to make the poem real, containing history, finding the story in the natural, the poetry in things. That’s naturalism as a scientific term, not as an emotional term, for the poet is uncovering the world in the intersection of observation and mind’s engagement. I think to me that is actually true of both of them. I wanted to read just a couple of quotes about Lorine to kind of highlight that.

Lorine said this in 1930: “I conceive of poetry as the folktales of the mind and us creating our own remembering. And no creature puts idiom on anything at all except by putting himself on it, and to me that means, inchoate thought, the Self association of nervous vocables colored by the rhythm of the moment ... this would be of course what no one else has written—else why write?”

That’s the other thing about Olson and Niedecker that is really important. They really wanted to be themselves. I think often Lorine is romanticized as a kind of nativist, you know writing and not really being part of the world. She really was part of the world. She wanted to be remembered. She wanted her words to be read even though she had all of her letters burned, everything she had except the poems. Olson, he clearly was obsessed with outdoing who came before him in that sort of classic Harold Bloom notion that the artist is always trying to kill the father, do better than the father. I think that’s a fairly patriarchal idea, doesn’t necessarily apply to Lorine. That’s clearly where Olson was going I think.

Three things to kind of highlight this, especially the feminist view of Lorine outside of this patriarchal tradition. Rachel Blau DuPlessis: “Niedecker’s ‘condensery’ poetics may well be a bilingual pun on Pound’s influential injunction in *The ABC of Reading*: that ‘Dichten = condensare,’ to make poetry is synonymous with the imperative infinitive to concentrate/compress/condense.

Lorine said, “For me the sentence lies in wait—all those prepositions and connectives—like an early spring flood.” That’s so great. “A good thing my follow-up feeling has always been condense, condense.” To her it was about control. If you think about the flood, that’s like emotion and feelings and she had to control that. She had to find a way of forcing that to be humanized. By taking out words and condensing, she’s asserting control. I think that’s really important because that is really what poetry is in a certain way. It could be looked at as sculpture where you’re trying to find the image within the rock, but it also could be that you’re trying to force the rock to conform with your idea of what a rock should be.

The last thing I want to read is from Jane Augustine who said, “Lorine saw herself as located in the gender-free category of poet in pure literary relation to other poetry writers and readers and deeply committed to the natural world.” That to me absolutely sums up who she was. She wanted to be poet with a capital P, and in the world, and part of the literary tradition, part of the literary world that she could create herself.

KARL GARTUNG:

A couple things occurred accidentally tonight. There’s one that’s accidental and one that’s not. In the poems we heard, the “Foreclosure” poem of Niedecker says “let property die out and leave me peace.” In the Olson poem, there are several lines directed at not engaging in the acquisition of things of denying property actually: “In the land of plenty, have / nothing to do with it / take the way of the lowest ...”. In both cases what David says about control is evident that Olson did not want to be encumbered. At the end of his life he didn’t want to be encumbered by any position. He only wanted to write. A lot of times he wouldn’t answer the door and sometimes for good reasons and sometimes not so good.

The other thing I noticed that after we started talking about this and I got out the first volume of *The Maximus Poems*, published by Jargon Society; and then the Fulcrum Niedecker *My Life by Water* is I noticed that *The Maximus Poems* was published in 1960. It was the one book that Niedecker requested that Williams send from the Jargon Society. This was according to Jenny Penberthy. She was well aware of Olson. Although Jenny says that she thought Olson was poaching a little bit on her territory. He was the guy with the gigantic physique and gigantic reputation at the time among poets. On the cover of the first volume of *Maximus* is a map of Gloucester and the soundings of the bay outside of Gloucester. On the cover of *My Life by Water* which is from Fulcrum, turns out that Stuart Montgomery who was the editor of Fulcrum visited Niedecker and was given that map which was drawn by the son of Ray Prisk, who actually buried Niedecker in a blizzard in January, 1970.

All right. I have to tell that story. I stopped at the bar at the end of the island and had the conversation with Ray and Myrtle Prisk. Myrtle, in response to my question—whether Niedecker ever came to the bar in the evening—said no, that Al came often, but “she was one by her self,” which I always thought was fantastic.

Ray Prisk told the story of burying Lorine in January at the Union Cemetery out there by Fort Atkinson. The ground was frozen. They had to dig it up with a backhoe, to which they both chimed in, “You know, Lorine was not a religious person and this damned minister decided he had to give a thirty minute eulogy at the grave site in the middle of a blizzard.” He said, “We were up to our armpits in snow by the time it was done and she went into the ground cold.”

CHUCK STEBELTON:

Hard.

KARL GARTUNG:

Went into the ground hard. You’re right. Went into the ground hard.

Where was I? Stuart Montgomery came and was given this map that Ray Prisk’s son drew of resorts and fishing locations on Lake Koshkonong and the Rock River. At the same time Stuart Montgomery was negotiating to do the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*, so Four, Five, Six, which eventually he didn’t get to do. Cape Goliard got the job. He took that map back which probably was not intended, according to Jenny, probably not intended to be the cover of her book. He took the map back and turned it into the cover of her book. There, side by side, are two poets of incredible ambition whose whole project floated in or on water and both have similar covers to their books. Of course Lorine’s is a lot smaller than Olson’s.

That’s all I’ve got to say. Do you have anything else?

DAVID WILK:

It is easy to get lost in the personal details as if they were in fact the story, but it is sort of interesting when you draw these comparisons of Olson and Niedecker how amazingly comparative they can be despite their differences. What’s interesting is how possible it is to read each of them separately and be overcome in different ways, that the work of each is so different. When you heard Olson reading you have that big expansive voice trying to dominate the room. If you take away the notion of that persona behind it and not worry about whose words they are, both of them are incredibly powerful, each individually. That’s all.

WHAT REGION?

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Correspondence and inquiries can be directed to:

What Region?
c/o Tom Montag
P.O. Box 8
Fairwater, WI 53931