Writing Lake Superior

"To name a rock, a feeling, a lake!"

"Elements for awhile before we again
become, if we ever do, another mass. Time
is nuttn in the universe."

Lorine Niedecker's "Lake Superior" – the first long poem she would see into print – occupies five pages with a total of 395 words. Her research and preparation for the poem, the punning and aptly named "millenium[1] of notes for my *magma* opus" (Niedecker to Corman, August 20, 1966), number 260 mostly typed, single-spaced pages. Tens of thousands of words.

In late July 1966 Lorine Niedecker and Al Millen set off in their Buick on a week-long journey around Lake Superior, "by way of L. Michigan shore to Mackinaw Country and Sault Ste. Marie . . . . along the Ontario shore and down the Minn. side" (Niedecker to Corman, July 12, 1966). The impulse to research the "*magma* opus," her epic of rocks and minerals (Davie 73), can be traced most directly to the previous summer's road trip through the Black Hills of South Dakota. Niedecker remarked to Corman on the "[r]eddish gravel beside the paved roads and in a couple of places a pale gold driveway-covering with gold bits or yellow diamond sparkles all thru it!" and "[t]he big rock structures in the hills . . . merely greyish or pinkish or yellowish depending on the time of

day" (July 28, 1965). A year later on 16 July 1966, just before leaving on the Lake Superior excursion, she wrote to Corman:

> You once spoke to me of rocks – someone there, is it Will Petersen? – has an interest in them. I begin to see how one can have. I think our NW (Lake Superior region, Minn., Mich., Wis.) is not only for the geologist, a massive, grand corruption of nature. And of language (wonder if *Bosho* is still used in speech for *Bon jour!* Indian, French, British –. The Northwest passage to the Orient has its Bosho only like a ton of rock. And weak verse like Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. But some kind of poetry has been felt by several of the geologists in that region.
>
> I'm frantic when I remember that gold and diamond ! driveway in South Dakota, not knowing what kind of stone or mineral it was. Probably a lot of quartz in it to give the shine.
>
> I'll use a little time to walk beaches since this country is part of the agate, jasper, carnelian, Thompsonite region. . . . Cid, no, I won't be writing for awhile, and I need time, like an eon of limestone or gneiss, . . .

She mocks the naiveté of the previous year – "that gold and diamond ! driveway" – as she readies herself for a journey in the field equipped now with facts and terminologies, matter for poetry.

The Milwaukee Public Library provided abundant materials for her preparatory research. Books to consult on the road, however, had to be carefully selected. A handwritten scrap among the "Lake Superior" papers hints at dilemma: "Might take bird books on trip." Note-taking was a necessary economy, but while habits of compression

came easily to her, we notice that along the way her "pocketbook broke from weight of notebooks[2] and stones."

Many of the "Lake Superior" notes serve this road trip; all of the notes serve the nascent poem. But the notes frustrate any search for direct evidence of the developing poem. One sees glimmers of the poem here and there – the "Chocolate River" section of the poem, for example, can be traced directly to the notes -- but these glimmers are fleeting. However oblique the relationship between notes and poem may be, the "Lake Superior" notes offer rare access to Niedecker's poetics.

The immediate impression they offer is of the vast body of facts lying behind a highly condensed poem. While only the "Lake Superior" notes have survived,[3] there is some indication that extensive note-taking was a familiar feature of her practice. "I write from notes, grocery lists. I throw up my arms and scream: Write – cut it and just write poems" (Niedecker to Corman, Feb. 14, 1968). A comparable ratio of notes to final poem is suggested in a letter she wrote to Edward Dahlberg: "I wish I could do the birds, worms, plants of my little plot of earth here in the manner of the first explorers landing in Virginia and with my own human setting, mental furnishing etc . . . all the Greeks, your Bible people, everyone and all ideas strained, pointed to this. I might get 8 lines!"[4] Writing "Lake Superior" appeared to require a mastery of facts. She sought out local geologists: "By the way, do you happen to know a geologist? I have stones from the Lake Superior region and here, and would like to identify" (to Ron Ellis, "Local Letters" 94). She told Corman she'd written "for geological maps from the office in Washington, D.C." and, in the same letter, conveyed her scholarly zeal: ". . . almost all petrified wood is agate-ized wood, I've read. The circles in the agate are of growth? Dunno, aim to find

out" (Aug. 20, 1966). She met Bob Nero at the Milwaukee Public Museum where, just before completing her first version of the poem, she continued "to research geology for her Lake Superior poem."[5]

The notes typescripts are undated and their composition history is open to speculation. A crucial and sometimes opaque distinction divides the notes made before and after the trip. I propose that the bulk of the notes was amassed before the trip and that the notes were organized and made accessible by her pervasive system of cross-referencing. These documents may well have traveled with her around Lake Superior. After the trip, she made further notes and it is the chronology of these that is important to an understanding of Niedecker's practice. In the following pages, I describe the different sections of the notes, provide excerpts, and propose a sequence for what I take to be the latter, post-trip sections. The remainder of the essay argues for this sequence and for the significance of the Lake Superior project.

One category of notes appears to be a conscientious tourist's advance transcriptions from guidebooks of key sites along the way, opening times for museums, and practical details for the collector of rock samples:

> Where to look in Minn.
> Little Marais, Lake Co., in gravels at County Line
> Beach. Agate, gravels at Two Harbors. Agate, gravels
> at Gooseberry Falls State Park Beach.
>
> Where to look in Mich.
> Thomsonites, pink, green – on the Keweenaw, Pete's
> and Grotiot R. beaches.
> Amethystine agate on Thomsonite Beach (Marquette Co.)
>
> Canada: moss agate at Thunder Bay and jasper at Kaka-
> beka Falls.

Another far larger body of notes also appears to have been made before the trip: transcriptions and summaries of her research from texts such as Walter Havighurst's *The Great Lakes Reader* – an anthology of excerpts from early explorers' journals – from *The Great Lakes* by H.H. Hatcher, from *Pine, Stream & Prairie* by James Gray, from *Minnesota: a History of the State* by Theodore C. Blegen, and many more.[6] She gave close attention to three books in the American Guide Series prepared by the WPA: *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State* (the volume to which Niedecker contributed as writer and researcher from 1938 to 1941), *Michigan: a Guide to the Wolverine State*, and *Minnesota: a State Guide*. These notes typescripts record detailed information about the geology of the Lake Superior region; about the cities, towns, rivers, and smaller lakes; about the generations of explorers[7] and their meetings with the aboriginal inhabitants. There are extended chronologies of the history, paleontology, and geology of the region, plus etymological charts and lexicons of geological terms. A vast apparatus of knowledge.

Within this large category, notes are bundled into their own improvised genres with text arranged on the page in a variety of densities. From one bundle to another, content is repeated and realigned. Selected facts and quotations are assembled alongside each other while non-contiguous parts are aligned by an elaborate system of cross-referencing. The result is an idiosyncratic taxonomy, a complex structure that maps the linkages between the plants, animals, rocks, and people, noting their evolutionary relationships – their predictable and accidental meetings, and outcomes.

The collection of "Lake Superior" notes is at its most enigmatic with the four handmade booklets – half A4-sized pages, soft cardboard covers, all bound with brass

pins – titled: “Schoolcraft,” “Remember Rocks,” “Minn. Alphabetized,” and “Milw. Shoreline.” In most cases, the text on a single page is spare and cryptic, pared down to a handful of words. The booklets list names of towns, rivers, lakes, plants, and historical facts along with blank unremarkable details often but not always cross-referenced to a single-spaced typescript of 36 numbered pages. Perhaps the booklets served a mnemonic purpose, designed to help her locate her research from the passenger seat. But they are scarcely a systematic index to the notes. The booklets practice an austere minimalism, and the white pages and sparse text often register as experimental poems.

Leaf R.

Scalp L.
Fish-line L.
Ottertail L.

Leaf R.

Sibly L. -- called “Lake which the River
passes thru one End of.”

Other source – Leaf River -- “A copper knife
evidently a relic of prehistoric times was found
in this river in 1903.”

Le Corbeau R. (Crow-Wing)

A short distance above the Falls of St. Anthony a river
empties in -- Rum R. p. 36

Nipigon R.

speckled trout

Port Arthur and Fort. Wm.

pop of over 100,000

Two Harbors
Agate City
on Agate Bay

When Indians first saw it they named it spear by moonlight

Now Agate City

Agates or Thompsonites here

R. R. museum here

Agate shop

It is unclear whether the brass-pin bound booklets were written before the trip or after, and whether they were accessory to the trip or to the poem.

Among the undeniably *post-trip* notes is a 12-page, single-spaced, typed prose account of the journey, an undated day-by-day travel journal – assembled in retrospect – tracing Niedecker and Millen's route. Travel journals written by the European explorers of the Great Lakes were among Niedecker's research sources, and she knew and admired Basho's prose and poetry journal of his travels in Japan's north country (she had read Corman's translation in *Origin* in July 1964). Her own travel narrative, first titled "Lake Superior and Minnesota Vacation Trip 1966" and revised to "Lake Superior Country: Vacation Trip 1966," is interspersed with historical and geological facts selected from her

notes. Additional details – omitted from the body of the narrative – are cross-referenced by roman numerals to yet another typescript titled "Notes":

> Swan Lake is nearby. In 1851 Indians and whites came from all over the mid-west to a treaty meeting at the mouth of the Minne-sota, Traverse des Sioux. Chief Sleepy Eyes came from his beloved Swan Lake. (XI, Notes)
>
> We started home. Brainard on the Mississippi (XII, Notes)
>
> Lake St. Croix – Schoolcraft sang the praises of this lake. The moon came out before they encamped. "If 'Loch Katrine' (Scotland) presents a more attractive outline of sylvan coast, it must be beautiful indeed. . . . ("Lake Superior Country" 325)

The prose narrative is the first evidence of an attempt to synthesize the research notes. It is a relaxed mobile account of the week-long itinerary into which she has inserted excerpts of historical, geological, and etymological narratives.

> We remember others who came there more than three centuries ago in long canoes . . . . (312)
>
> The North is one vast, massive, glorious corruption of rock and language – granite is underlaid with limestone or sandstone, gneiss is made-over granite, shale, or sandstone and so forth and so on and Thompsonite (or Thomsonite) is often mistaken for agate and agate is shipped in from Mexico and Uruguay and can even be artificially dyed in the bargain. And look what's been done to language! – People of all nationalities and color have changed the language like weather and pressure have changed the rocks. (314)

Verb tenses shift uncorrected between past and present as she moves into retrospective mode, her own journey now an element in her project of engaging layers of time. In several places Niedecker's actual journeying parallels that of the early explorers. She echoes Schoolcraft's excitement at finding the source of the Mississippi by quoting his elevated language: "At last the joyous discovery – Lake Le Biche (Elk Lake) – renamed by Schoolcraft, Itasca" (323). Her own usage is comparatively muted: "sweet little swampy place where the water rises" (323).

The steady momentum of the prose narrative is disrupted in what I take to be the later stage of the notes – a densely packed ten-page typescript titled "Notes from the Trip" with a cover sheet marked "Important." These are working notes with much marginal annotation. The ten pages include selected and condensed passages from the prose narrative along with words, phrases, and truncated quotations from the source texts represented elsewhere in the notes. Piecing together fragments from different areas of the entire body of notes – the textual "world of the lake" – she begins to stage her own "grand corruption of nature and language." "Bring on your purities and yr impurities for it's the mixture of minerals – lava flow – and rock that creates their colors" ("Lake Superior Country" 317). Acutely aware of geological analogies for her own writing process, she's poised for new alloys:

> Lake Duluth sent its waters into the ancient St. Croix.
>
> In Minnesota land of sky-tinted waters   wild roses, New
> Jersey Tea, Labrador Tea, lady-slipper
>
> carnelian -- sard – a clear chalcedony – a crypto crystalline
> quartz, as is jasper, agate, chrysoprase, onyx, sardonyx, chert.
>
> Quartz changes under different temperatures – i.e. silica
> combined with water is opal
>
> They decay to form something else.   Momentary equilibrium,
> coming to rest (Lake Plantaganette (The Rest in the Path) during
> which we name it. . . .
>
> I spent a week in green
>
> wilderness – road flying thru it, thru cut rock, the past in
> mind and the imagination able to project 40 million years ?
> Reasonable to suppose that –
>
> This is the theme: the going – even in the pause of this day's
> century

interrelation

interrelation of peoples, stones, boats,
the changing according to a vast, overall, timeless scheme of
continuous progression.

Source of Miss.

not here the river began but in the clouds
in the mind, imagination which is capable of being projected
not farther than 40 million years.

raining there – the leaf was once the stone in the rain – spurn not
the falling rain, it is the source of the source, the creator
of rivers. . . .

The face of the earth is a graveyard and so it has always been.

My inner midwest

I was in a St. Ignace fog . . .

Know stones? Nevermind
if I don't know their names –
the polished black with the lace in it, or the gunmetal with skulls
and separate eye sockets
to name a feeling – a rock -- a lake!
("Notes from the Trip")

Beyond the first page of "Notes from the Trip," references to the contemporary journey are few, and the chronology of their route is lost. It is this critical bundle of notes that is nearest in spirit to the poem.

The trip itself had involved compromise and disappointment of a kind that only the poem could assuage. Her ambition had been to "walk beaches," but she complained that she saw very little of Lake Superior because few of the roads took them along the

shoreline. "And you're whizzing along the highway with a glimpse of beach but there's traffic behind and you simply continue to whiz" ("Lake Superior Country" 312). Opportunities to examine actual details of her research were rare. "When you can with some difficulty walk over that terrain to the shore you suddenly find you're on a high bluff and how are you going to get way down to the water" ("Lake Superior Country" 311). After her trip to the Black Hills the summer before, she wrote somewhat bitterly to Corman: "I see a flower I've never seen or rocks . . . or a glimpse of a blue lake, but you whiz by – you'd have to walk – someday – after you're dead –" (July 28, 1965).

It appears that Al's preference was to make good time, to press on: "[A]h, a long shot," she poses teasingly in the narrative, "but could we swerve off our course a bit and from the Soo to Lake Itasca go west from Grand Marais or Duluth instead of directly home?" ("Lake Superior Country" 316) Misled once by signs for a side trip to Ouimet Falls, Niedecker and Millen preferred to keep to the highway; digressions were strictly textual. The final day of the weeklong trip[8] was a long and taxing drive from Little Falls, Minn. to Fort Atkinson via the expressway: "Fast-moving out of slow geologic time."

Much depended on the poem. "Yes," she wrote to Corman, "the Lake Superior trip was a great delight if I can make the poem" (August 20, 1966). She had complained to Zukofsky about the pitfalls of writing "direct from life," and she told Clayton Eshleman that "It's in the province of natural history that imagination . . . is limited by actual experience, but [imagination] has the innate impulse to cross barriers" (Dec. 27, 1967).[9] To write "Lake Superior," she would need to remove the coordinates that had sped her past the lake.

At least two completed versions of the poem predate the final “Lake Superior.” Two months after the journey, Niedecker sent “Circle Tour” to Morgan Gibson at *Arts in Society*. Apparently it was written as a continuous long poem. Here is the only surviving excerpt:

> Sault Sainte Marie
> Old day pause for *voyageurs*,
> bosho (bon jour) sung out
> by garrison men
>
> Now the locks, big boats
> coal-black and iron-ore-red
> topped with what white castlework
>
> White-flying birds
>
> Iron the common element of earth
> in rocks and freighters –
> and most things living
>
> Arrowed rest room signs in the park
> between us and the freighters –
> the arrows of our day
> and the momentary unsinging pause
>
> The waters working together
> internationally
> gulls playing both sides[10]

On October 6, 1966 Niedecker wrote to Gibson again: “Re-reading the poem Circle Tour which I mailed to you a week or so ago I’m almost praying you’ll send it back. Between typographical errors and weak spots in the poem itself I’m actually embarrassed. Oh the terrors of the long poem . . .” (“Local Letters” 90). A week later she had revised the long poem into a numbered series titled “TRAVELERS/ Lake Superior Region” and resubmitted it to *Art in Society*. She told Jonathan Williams, “Morgan has just taken my long Lake Superior poem for *Arts in Society* (it was a long poem but now

I've cut it into short, sharp (we hope) nuggets of that rocky tour – why anyone ever wants to write a long poem?!)" (Jan. 11, 1967).[11] Only in October 1967, a year later, did she omit the numbering, obscure the contemporary travelers, and further condense the poem into "Lake Superior."[12]

The disrupted continuities so central to Niedecker's poetics can be traced back to an important juncture in the notes, the point where the consistent pace, sequence, and syntax of the prose narrative and indeed of other prose segments of the notes, needed to be shed. The fragmentary "Notes from the Trip" were written, I suggest, *after* the prose narrative as part of a necessary dismantling of the vast system of notes that had by now served its purpose. In "Notes from the Trip," as in the poem, the chronology of the journey is barely discernible. Other continuities are interrupted too. Doug Crase points out in his reading of "Lake Superior" that Niedecker inverts the chronology of Radisson's life by referring first to his travels through Wisconsin – "a laborinth of pleasure" – and then the fingernail pulling by the Mohawks (335). The technique aims to suppress the expected and highlight the unexpected thereby flattening the hierarchies of official history and memory as enshrined in her prose sources.

For Niedecker, prose connoted literal and figurative control. We recall her characterization of the predatory sentence that "lies in wait . . ." (Niedecker to Corman, Feb. 18, 1962) and the "clause of claws" that led her to inveigh against prose in the final lines of "Foreclosure": "may prose and property both die out/and leave me peace" (*LN: CW* 291). To guard against the assertions of prose, she equipped herself with techniques for "disequilibrium," Robert Duncan's term that she quoted in a letter to Bob Nero.[13]

Prose was always for Niedecker the lesser genre, but here and throughout her work, it is an important originator and facilitator. Much of her poetry can be traced to her reading of prose texts, which clearly played a crucial generative role. While the emerging "Lake Superior" poem had to find ways to disengage from its prose origins, Niedecker nevertheless retained the rhythmic imprint of prose. The "drab"[14] prose rhythms are a calculated refusal of heightened language. Her resistance occurs at the level of rhythm as she pushes towards anti-rhetorical extremes. The result is a consciously flattened discourse that, in "Lake Superior," evokes the uninflected rock-like environment.

In contrast to long poems such as "Wintergreen Ridge" (Sept./Oct. 1967) and "Paean to Place" (Oct. 1968), the layout of "Lake Superior" presents no visual template. Niedecker chooses not to use her 5-line stanza, by now a compositional staple. In its final form, each section of the poem is a discrete fragment with little stated continuity between parts. White space predominates over characteristically minimal placements of text, and the disparate parts coalesce within a mute and implacable topography. Natural history takes hold. The two early titles – "Circle Tour" and "TRAVELERS/Lake Superior Region" – lodge the poem with the human circumnavigators. In its final revision, the title is given to the lake.

The great lake itself is scarcely addressed in the poem. From the notes, we know the lake in a variety of voices: "the shining big sea water," "the China Sea," "the blue profound," "the purest of the lakes." Water had powerful resonance for Niedecker: "Of course I don't care for Gods and Kings etc. in my poems but the wetness, the loaded with legend (water lege – well, just to say the word water loads me with writing material . . ." (Niedecker to Cox). For all its foundation in literal journeying, the poem itself dwells in a

kind of awed stasis, an arrested momentum, an unbreathing verticality, all of which evoke the great lake at the center. The voices of human history and written records are fleeting. Much of the poem is given to silence – the sound and presence of the lake.

One of the keys to understanding Niedecker's method in this period lies in her ardent embrace of geology. "Geology has done so much for me!" (Niedecker to Corman, Dec. 7, 1967) Her references to poetry were often framed in geological language: "The only time the lava really flows is those moments while the poems are being written" (Niedecker to Corman, Oct. 24, 1967). She's on familiar terms with rocks and dramatizes an actual encounter: "So how-do-you-do to an agate" ("Lake Superior Country" 311). She also felt a kinship with other mappers of the territory – "some kind of poetry [that] has been felt by several of the geologists in the region" (Niedecker to Corman, July 16, 1966) – and went so far as to identify herself with rock and earth. In Gail Roub's photographs of her, she saw in her face "the fissures of the rock" (Nov. 8, 1967).[15] She told Corman that like limestone and gneiss, she needed an eon of time for her poem. She writes, in a pastiche of Whitman, "Every bit of you is a bit of the earth and has been on many strange and wonderful journeys over countless millions of years" ("Lake Superior Country" 311), referring to herself with a modest "touch of grey earth always clinging to me" (Niedecker to Kenneth Cox, May 14, 1969).

She finds daring identity between poetry and rock in her elliptical and compacted remark: "The Northwest passage to the Orient has its Bosho only like a ton of rock" (Niedecker to Corman, July 16, 1966). It was Jean Nicolet who, thinking he'd crossed the China Sea and found a northwest passage to the Orient, donned a flowered damask kimono for his meeting with the Winnebagoes in Wisconsin. "Bosho" was the local

corruption of “Bonjour” and also, of course, the 17th century Japanese haiku master translated by Corman.[16] “[A] ton of rock” – geological conglomerate – is the poetry of the northwest. Accordingly “Lake Superior” comes alive in its rock sections.

Science and geology were an integral part of her developing poetics. In fact, her much cited exploratory statement of poetics in a letter to Gail Roub on June 20, 1967, should be read in terms of the geological tropes arising out of the “Lake Superior” project. The heat of lava and molten rock, the echoes of “this world of the Lake” (*LN: CW* 232), the interdependence of animate and inanimate matter:

> Much taken up with how to define a way of writing poetry which is not Imagist nor Objectivist fundamentally nor Surrealism alone . . . . The basis is direct and clear – what has been seen or heard etc . . . – but something gets in, overlays all that to make a state of consciousness. . . . 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. A heat is generated and takes in the whole world of the poem. A light, a motion, inherent in the whole. . . . The *tone* of the thing. And awareness of everything influencing everything.

A scientific account of the past and present gave her access to poetry and a paradoxical release into the metaphysical. She had long been a reader of philosophers of science such as Diderot, Newton, Bertrand Russell, and others. The fusion of science and art, of the material and the metaphysical, was intoxicating for her and one that she returned to repeatedly in her reading and writing. She delighted, for instance, in the reverberating time-frames of Fontenelle’s “within the memory of a rose no gardener had been known to die” (*Niedecker and the Correspondence* 134). Several times in the notes,

she quotes H.G. Wells' statement that the "the imagination can project 40 million years." A typographical slip – one to savour rather than correct – adds philosophy to a scientific observation: defining plutonic rock she writes, "The Platonics have cooled and solidified at some depth and much more slowly."

Her research on rocks revealed their extraordinary interdependence, both local and global: "Rubies result in the presence of chromium oxide in corundum. Sapphires depend on titanium and iron impurities in corundum." The name "corundum," as Donald Davie points out, derives from the southern hemisphere, the Tamil word "kuruntam" (71). "The quartz sand of Coney Island has one part of silicon and two parts oxygen, just like the quartz sand of the Sahara Desert." Rocks propose the unities of time and space central to the vision of the poem.

The experience of research and travel in the region had its exhilarations. Searching for language for the sublime, she turned to geology which offered her an unromantic and inverse model of transcendence. As water is her medium in a poem like "Paean to Place," so with this project it is rock, a conjunction nicely embodied in the protean Rock River that she lived beside for most of her life. In all her "Lake Superior" reading, it is the language of geology – stripped bare, bordering on abstraction – that attracts her most consistently. She chooses to immerse herself in geology rather than in human history. She might have adopted conservationism as a model, for instance, pursuing the note struck in her elegy for the extinct passenger pigeon.[17] But having registered the dependence of all forms of life on rock – "In every part of every thing is stuff that once was rock" – she goes a step further and identifies herself and poetry with

rock. She had abundant opportunities to adopt explorer/discovery rhetoric but she resisted those inflections and tropes and instead chose a more daring allegiance with rock.

What language would she use to express her delight, her own "joyous" discoveries? The language of the explorers is contaminated by cruelty and special interests. She speaks of "The grand corruption of nature and language" using "corruption" with technical accuracy, but fully aware of the moral corruption of her race. There is little overt political commentary in the notes.[18] She navigates her sources with care, ignoring Havighurst and others' egregious paternalism, and simply quoting accounts of duplicity and hubris:

> Scouting and fur-trading for Champlain, Radisson exclaimed, "We were Cesars, nobody to contradict us." (320)
>
> S[choolcraft]'s treaty with Indians meeting – S[choolcraft] records that a party of Indians came from Rainy Lake but had recently resided at Springing Bowstring Lake. "The chief had heard the Americans say 'Peace, Peace.' But he thought that advice resembled a rushing wind. It was strong and went soon. It did not abide long enough to choke up the road."

She challenges the ideology of the Christian explorers and their bigoted historians by locating the triumph of the region in matter conventionally regarded as inert.

The transcendent moments in the poem are given to the rocks whose names – dense with acoustic qualities: "azoic," "corundum," "gneiss" – offer a material register of their compacted histories.[19] "[A]ll those rock names and geological terms [that] might have come directly word for thing" she wrote to Corman about Hugh MacDairmid's poem, "Once in a Cornish Garden" (August 20, 1966); "Ordinarily I don't want line after line of science terms. But I think it might be possible that names of rocks and rock systems created or taken from usage in those early days of this not too old science of rocks and earth formation not only show up application of word to thing but maybe the

delight of it all in the senses" (Niedecker to Bob Nero, August 19, 1966). Reference overlaps reverence.

Further intensities in the poem are located in verbal conglomerates where she gives full rein to non-hierarchical linguistic effects: phonemic echoes in, for example, "Marquette grazed/azoic rock" (*LN: CW* 233), tricks of syntax in, for example, "To Labrador and back to vanish" (*LN: CW* 234), and etymological and literary undercurrents. The ritual by which Marquette's petrified remains are disinterred is a series of water/land transpositions conducted with a "rich and strange" ornateness paralleled by the depths and echoes of the language:

> And his bones of such is coral
> raised up out of his grave
> were sunned and birch bark-floated
> to the straits (*LN: CW* 233)

If geological activity offered Niedecker a matching trope for metamorphosing language, it also offered her a natural model for the subliminal operations of the mind and for stratified layers of consciousness. Hard geological terms abutting airy mental constructs apparently posed no contradiction for her and offered instead an incidental opportunity for wit. It was in this period in the 1960s that she made an explicit return to her 1930s experiments in representing "planes of consciousness"[20]: "I felt something like subliminals coming on . . . . reverting to my youth!" she wrote to Corman on Dec. 15, 1966. Five months earlier, following her intense note-taking on the natural and human history of the Lake Superior region, she had remarked to Corman, "we are always inhabiting more than one realm of existence – but they all fit in if the art is right" (July 16, 1966).

For Niedecker, the art of the poem required a daunting blend of both mastery and chance. Of her later poem “Thomas Jefferson,” she reported, “[I did] all that reading beforehand (until I realized what am I doing? – writing a biography or history?? No, all I could do is fill up the subconscious and let it lie and fish up later)” (“Extracts from Letters to Kenneth Cox,” Feb. 2, 1970). A poetry founded on mastery *and* chance offers several planes for the reader to traverse, an effect described by Niedecker as “sliding in and out of the subcon[cious], the con[scious] showing at instants like the different shades and shapes of leaves and grass in the sunlight” and “the fascination of something rich and strange – out of shadows or dark stricture suddenly this brilliant and telling wit of wit or clear description or image.”[21] It’s a model that reinterprets the awe-inspiring and the ordinary. She wrote to Bob Nero, “I dream of an ease of speech that takes in the universe” (Apr. 20, 1967). At the same time she recalled her beginnings: “Early in life I looked back of our buildings and said, ‘I am what I am because of all this.’”[22] “Lake Superior” negotiates the local and the global, the self and the species: *we are what we are because of all this*. Her point of access is the unselfconscious notations of geology and pre-history. There, through her own painstaking practice, she locates the solace of an immanent infinite.

Notes

Unacknowledged quotations are drawn from the unpublished “Lake Superior” notes. For permission to publish, thanks to the Hoard Historical Museum in Fort Atkinson. Niedecker’s letters to Cid Corman are drawn from Lisa Pater Faranda’s invaluable edition, “*Between Your House and Mine*”*: The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960-1970*. Letters from Niedecker to Bob Nero are unpublished – thanks to Bob Nero for permission to publish. The majority of Niedecker’s letters to Kenneth Cox are unpublished too and my thanks go to the Cox estate for permission to publish.

[1.] In 1963 Niedecker married Al Millen and her misspelled “millennium” is a deliberate play on his name.

[2.] The archive of “Lake Superior” notes in the Hoard Historical Museum in Fort Atkinson offers little in the way of “notebooks.” Most of the notes are loose-leaf typescripts and manuscripts of varying dimensions. Niedecker’s comment raises the possibility that the collection of notes may not be complete.

[3.] After Niedecker’s death in 1970, Al Millen followed her instructions to burn all of her remaining letters and papers. One cardboard box went unnoticed and was passed to Gail and Bonnie Roub by Al’s daughter Julie Schoessow. This box contained the “Lake Superior” notes and Niedecker’s photograph collection.

[4.] Jan. 4, 1956. Niedecker’s letters to Edward Dahlberg appear in the present collection.

[5.] Bob Nero, “Remembering Lorine,” *Truck* 16 (Summer 1975): 137.

[6.] Some of the other books consulted for the project include *Journey into Summer: A Naturalist’s Record of a 19,000 Mile Journey through the North American Summer* by

Edwin Way Teale; *Rocks, Rivers, and the Changing Earth* by Herman and Nina Schneider; *Darwin's Century* by Loren Eisley; *The Common Sense of Science* by J. Bronowski.

[7.] Niedecker's Wisconsin origins plus her wartime research for the *Wisconsin Guide* would have provided early immersion in state lore. A 1940s "New Goose" Manuscript poem registers her exposure to the history of the Lake Superior region:

> Voyageurs
> sang, rowed
> their canoes full of furs,
>
> sang as they rowed.
> Ten minutes every hour
> rested their load. (*Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* 117)

[8.] Day 1: Green Bay, Escanaba, Gladstone, Manistique; day 2: St. Ignace, Sault Saint Marie (Michigan); day 3: Sault Saint Marie (Canada), Wawa, White River; day 4: Marathon, Lake Nipigon, Port Arthur; day 5: Fort William, Pigeon River, Schroeder, Grand Marais, Two Harbours, Duluth, Itasca, Winnibigoshish, Lake Bemidji, Walker, Leech Lake, Swan River; day 6?: Brainard, Lake St. Croix, Pine City, Little Falls; day 7: Fort Atkinson.

[9.] Niedecker's letters to Clayton Eshleman appear in the present collection.

[10.] Her 1966 Xmas card to the Neros includes an excerpt "from Circle Tour." Strange that she should use "Circle Tour" when she had revised it in October.

[11.] From an unpublished letter to Jonathan Williams. Thanks to Jonahtan Williams and Poetry/Rare Books Collection, SUNY-Buffalo for permission to quote.

[12.] Lisa Pater Faranda gives an excellent account of the revisions in "Composing a Place: Two Versions of Lorine Niedecker's 'Lake Superior'" *North Dakota Quarterly* (Fall 1997): 348-64.

[13.] She was reading Duncan's "Towards an Open Universe." (Niedecker's letters to Bob Nero during the period of writing and revising "Lake Superior" and the related "Traces of Living Things" -- roughly June 1966 to October 1967 -- quote Robert Duncan's essay several times, for example, "We are all the many expressions of living matter" and "a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity.") In Niedecker's papers in the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson is her quotation from H.H. Honda in *The Poetry of Tabuboku*: "Poems . . . should not be thorough and complete, but piecemeal and fragmentary."

[14.] Both Donald Davie (70) and Thom Gunn talking about other poems ("Weedy Speech and Tangled Bank" *TLS* 14 Feb. 1992: 25) use the word "drab".

[15.] Niedecker to Gail Roub, *Origin*, ser. 4, 16 (July 1981): 44.

[16.] *Back Roads to Far Towns*, trans. Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu (New York: Grossman, 1968). It first appeared in *Origin*, ser. 2, 14 (July 1964).

[17.] The only note of conscience in the *Wisconsin Guide* is in the chapter on "Conservation" contributed or at least overseen by Aldo Leopold.

[18.] Davie criticizes her failure to pass judgment on the cruelty of the colonial explorers (72). Doug Crase believes that Niedecker's judgment lies in her practice of omission -- an ethics of omission (334).

[19.] There is no indication that Niedecker was aware of the gemstone Kunzite discovered and named in 1902 by George Frederick Kunz (1856 – 1932), a gemologist employed at

Tiffanies in New York. Niedecker's maternal name was Kunz. My thanks to Marilla Fuge in Fort Atkinson for this information.

20. "Letters to *Poetry* Magazine" 181.

21. Niedecker writing to Kenneth Cox about the effect of reading Mallarmé and Zukofsky. She could be describing her own poetry. Undated ms.

22. Letter to Gail Roub, 1967.

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