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Book Review

Lorine Niedecker, *Collected Works*, edited by Jenny Penberthy. University of California Press, 2002. ISBN 0-22434-5 (paper)

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For students and teachers of American literature in Turkey, the publication of Lorine Niedecker's *Collected Works* in 2002 might have been merely a small blip on their academic radar screens. But it's worth calling attention to the event, for despite her near invisibility in the official canon, Niedecker is one of America's most important modernist poets. Born in 1903 (she died in 1970), Niedecker's writing life began in the 1920s under the influence of the Imagists, especially Pound, Amy Lowell, and H.D. She did not, however, remain long with what she regarded as a confining program--a judgment apparent in this parting shot:

> The sound of a mourning dove
> slows the dawn
> there is a dee round silence
> in the sound.
>
> Or it may be I face the dull prospect
> of an imagist
> turned philosopher.
>
> ("Mourning Dove")

Instead, following her own inclinations, she adopted a surrealistic approach to exploring personal consciousness and life in America, thus becoming that rarity, an original American surrealist; for it was only after meeting Louis Zukofsky some years later that she became aware of her French contemporaries.

Niedecker was born and reared in rural America in the town of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, far from such literary centers as San Francisco, New York, or Chicago. Forced to leave college after a year to care for her ailing mother, she worked in the local library and there read Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and the other modernist writers. She felt a closer affinity, however, to the Objectivist poets Williams, Oppen, and Reznikoff, whom she discovered in 1931 in the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* magazine edited by Louis Zukofsky. After she sent some of her work to Zukofsky, he invited her to New York and introduced her to the literary avant-garde there, as well as tipping her to the French journal *transition* and the Surrealist experiments to be found in it. Their literary relationship would survive a love affair and last to the end of Niedecker's life.

Although Niedecker admired the Objectivist poets' interest in words as artifacts rather than merely representational signs, she did not embrace Objectivism herself, but continued to pursue the expression of experience in nonrepresentational

forms in her own way. As the 1930s and the Great Depression wore on, her work took on a social and political awareness influenced by her reading of Marx and Engels. She developed an interest in "folk poetry" and nursery rhymes, and honed the satirical edge of her work as she took on both local issues--

> For sun and moon and radio
> farmers pay dearly;
> their natural resource: turn
> the world off early.
> (from *New Goose*)—

and European developments like Fascism, the Spanish Civil War, and Nazism:

> From Croatia my home to Moelling no pay
> for our work, lay down at night without hay,
> three days toward Berlin, one bread for six,
> saw many die of cold and the whips.
> At Bergen built roads tied to a pot,
> crossed to Sweden tho one in our party was shot.
> ("European Travel (Nazi New Order)"

Like James Agee, Studs Terkel, and other American writers, Niedecker found work in 1938 with the federal Work Project Administration (WPA). There, as a participant in the Federal Writers' Project, she helped produce *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State*. (These "tourist guides," produced with federal funds during the Roosevelt administration, are some of the most literate and authoritative sources for the history and sociology of individual states.) Other jobs included working as scriptwriter for a radio station, stenographer, library assistant, and finally as a janitor.

There is thus to be found in Niedecker's poetry a productive tension deriving from her dual perspective as both resident of a rural hamlet and member of a sophisticated avant-garde. Her work offers an incisive X-ray of American culture in the '30s and '40s—its values, its tics, its subterranean fears and desires—as well as a sardonic commentary on the dissonance between historic ideals and current reality. Not that hers is an ideological poetry: on the contrary, it is a poetry of acute observation, of experience registered in the finest subtleties of language and graced with a complex and impeccable musicality that produces awe. To quote a poem for fun, let's take "Foreclosure" from *Harpsichord & Salt Fish*:

> Tell em to take my bare walls down
> my cement abutments
> their parties thereof
> and clause of claws
>
> Leave me the land
> Scratch out: the land
>
> May prose and property both die out
> and leave me peace.

The *Collected Works* contains 300 pages of such poems, all of which gain in effect through the interplay created by their groupings. There are in addition 60 pages of well-wrought prose, including short stories and radio plays. It was not an easy collection to edit: published quite sparsely in her lifetime, Niedecker was an inveterate reviser who continually tinkered with her poems and frequently re-arranged their sequences. Arriving at an authoritative text, consequently, is often a hit-or-miss job. The reader must be grateful to editor Jenny Penberthy for providing textual variants and their history in a comprehensive "Notes" section of 100 pages. Clearly for her this has been a labor of love.

The publication of this volume should help correct the prevailing notion that American literary modernism begins and ends with Pound and Eliot, Stevens and Moore, and a few other poets canonized by the Norton Anthology. Niedecker's work, like Emily Dickinson's, belongs in the classroom of every American literature teacher in the country—for she may prove to have been, indeed, the Emily Dickinson of the twentieth century.