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# Nystagmic Poetics in Lorine Niedecker's Postwar Poetry

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NYSTAGMIC POETICS IN LORINE  
NIEDECKER'S POSTWAR POETRY

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

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by  
Edward Richard Max Ferrari  
September 2019

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## ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the work of Lorine Niedecker, a poet not conventionally associated with disability studies, in order to flesh out an account of the function of visual disability in midcentury poetics and praxis. To do this I read Niedecker's formative sequence "For Paul," the late long poem "Wintergreen Ridge," and other poems, through deformative practices in the belief that such an engagement shows how Niedecker's hybrid objectivist praxis can be integrated with critical models of disability studies. Such an integration is then bodied forth in what I'm calling a "nystagmic poetics." In such a poetics, the physical eye unseats ableist models of untroubled optical agency, such as those found in imagist and objectivist poetry, and extends the relevance of its revised understanding of visual modality to all bodies. Thus nystagmic poetics responds to the call to substantially address the fact of disability and to consider whether a more fully imagined poetics of partial sight is a productive critical lens for thinking about literature.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Jan Michelle Andres and our little girl, Penelope Max Ferrari. I have watched both of them grow in the time it has taken this project to take shape. If I have also grown then it is thanks to them. Oh, and Jan, thank you for sending me to school and for paying for everything.

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CHAPTER ONE  
JOURNAL ARTICLE

Nystagmic Poetics in Lorine Niedecker's Postwar Poetry

The light is like a spider.  
It crawls over the water.  
It crawls over the edges of the snow.  
It crawls under your eyelids  
And spreads its webs there—  
Its two webs.

The webs of your eyes  
Are fastened  
To the flesh and bones of you  
As to rafters or grass.

There are filaments of your eyes  
On the surface of the water  
And in the edges of the snow.

— Wallace Stevens, "Tattoo" (64).

Wallace Stevens's poem "Tattoo" describes an unusual mode of perception. Instead of a poet looking *at* and writing *about* objects, the perceiver of "Tattoo" seems involved in a curiously interactive state of seeing *with* the things it describes. The organs of perception, "your eyes," are part of the world being perceived, and depend upon the world to make knowledge: "There are filaments of your eyes / On the surface of the water / And in the edges of the snow" (64). Here is a different modality of perception, one that goes beyond the boundaries of the brain in order to describe a participatory sense-making seated in the whole body and reliant upon that body's interaction with the world around it. Conventionally, we account for perception as an internal process of representation intentionally directed at the world that gets acted upon, but here it is a pre-reflective knowledge inherent in the body, in "the flesh and bones of you," that holds an implicit perception of the environment around it (64). This embodied notion of perception suggests a different approach to reading poetry one in which poetry can be understood not as content-bearing, as being about perception, but as an enactment of perception in itself.

What it would mean to apply such an idiom to poetry is in part suggested by Myron Turner's article on Stevens and Henry Green, published in the winter edition of *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* in 1967. Lorine Niedecker read that article and appears to have found a compelling definition for the poetics she had been formulating over the course of her career. Turner's

description of Stevens's work as an example of "a literature based upon a shifting reality" that sought to "convey the quality of perception" through "a richly perceived and surrealistically presented reality" must have sparked a jolt of recognition in Niedecker because she wrote to her friend Gail Roub that summer, saying she was "much taken up with how to define a way of writing poetry that is not Imagist nor Objectivist fundamentally nor Surrealism alone" (Niedecker qtd. in Faranda 9; Turner 66, 69, 75). In Turner's comments on perception Niedecker apparently recognized a way to define her "reflective" compositional practice:

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. Closest I've come to anyone else talking about it is an article in the winter issue of Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature [...] the author [Turner] [...] takes Henry Green (novelist) and Wallace Stevens (poet) as his examples. 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 that is generated and takes in the whole world of the poem. A light, a motion, inherent in the whole. Not surprising since modern poetry and old poetry if it's good, proceeds not from one point to the next linearly but in a circle. The *tone* of the thing. And awareness of everything influencing everything ... (Niedecker qtd. in Faranda 9).

Tellingly, Niedecker's major additions to what is in fact a close paraphrase of the critic A.P. Blackmur's words, whom Turner quotes, point to a sensitive awareness of the embodied nature of visual perception.<sup>1</sup> The 'web' of connections Niedecker imagines, that of "everything influencing everything," starts from a "state of consciousness" that is the result of a disrupted perception, "what has been seen or heard," into which "something gets in" (9). For Niedecker the visual form of a poem is experienced as an embodied phenomena; it is a kinesthetic, somatosensory experience, "a heat that is generated," "a light," a perceived "motion" that is both non-hierarchical and non linear (9). As Jenny Penberthy writes, for Niedecker, "poems are acts of mind, complex acts of perception," and her work represents "a poetry attuned to its production in perception" (Penberthy "'Listening's Trace'" 66-67). It is this attunement, Penberthy argues, that led to a "critical appraisal of the embedded codes and conventions of her time" (58).

One such implicit code was the assumption of the 'clear, physical eye' in objectivist praxis. It was in part a contradiction between her actual experience of sightedness and the implicitly normalized eye/I of objectivism that prompted this development. Although the coherence of 'Objectivism' as a historical term has

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<sup>1</sup> "Tattoo" connects to Turner's article through his engagement with A.P. Blackmur's *The Double Agent*, a study of 'tone' in Wallace Steven's work. The words Niedecker paraphrases in her letter to Gail Roub are Blackmur's: "The strictly visual form is in the background, merely indicated by the words; it is what the visual form gave off after it had been felt in the mind that concerned him" (79). This is Blackmur describing the use of 'tone' in Steven's poem "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." He contrasts it what he sees as the "simple visual image" in "Tattoo" (81). Blackmur also remarks that "Fairy Tales and Mother Goose use the same language" as the poem (81).

been questioned,<sup>2</sup> objectivist praxis can be usefully contextualized as an avant garde response to imagism that both subsumed and intensified that school's focus on poetic vision. If imagism represents a pursuit, in Hugh Kenner's famous phrase, of "technical hygiene," then objectivism, with its emphasis on concision and attention as well as the poet's skillful ability to look at things with a 'clear, physical eye,' sought to be a renewal and purification of that 'hygiene' (Kenner 178). As Louis Zukofsky wrote in "An Objective," in many ways the founding document of the objectivist movement and Niedecker's historical point of encounter with it, "strabismus," an eye-movement disorder, "may be a topic of interest between two strabismics; those who see straight look away" (12). Zukofsky's co-option of visual disability to define what he means by a poetics dependent on "seeing straight" is foundational to objectivist praxis, and may, as Penberthy asserts, "have galvanized resistance in the vision impaired Niedecker" (66). Zukofsky's overt ableism suggests the normalized ocularcentric aesthetic of objectivism in general; as Monique Vescia writes in her study of objectivism and documentary photography, objectivist praxis seems to have indexed a broader cultural fascination with visual access to the real and was indicative of a belief in "the objective truth of sight, that our visual perception can and does, on occasion, afford us direct and unmediated access to reality itself" (122). Vescia suggests that the 'core' objectivists, including George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, and

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<sup>2</sup> See: W. Scott Howard and Broc Rossell in the intro to *Poetics and Praxis 'After' Objectivism* (2018), Rachel Blau DuPlessis in *The Objectivist Nexus* (1999), and Jeffrey Twichell-Wass "What Were the 'Objectivist' Poets?" (2015).

William Carlos Williams, worked within the parameters of this model of normalized visual embodiment. But, as will be apparent from my reading of “For Paul,” “Wintergreen Ridge,” and other poems, the evolution of Niedecker’s poetics results in a dramatically divergent model of embodied perception that prompts the reader to turn away from the hygienic model of high modernism and to embrace a deformity of the reading eye.

The model of complex perceptual embodiment found in “Wintergreen Ridge” is very different from either Williams’ use of triadic stanzas in serial form, or Zukofsky’s somewhat superficial approach to sound in his long poem *A*. Niedecker’s poem grants us access to more complex forms of visual embodiment, an intersubjective and participatory sense-making. It is for this reason that it both extends the project of disability poetics while also exposing its limitations. Written in the late 1960s “Wintergreen Ridge” connects Niedecker and “third wave” objectivism to the embodied poetics of the ‘60s that Michael Davidson discusses. Davidson suggests that there is a need to theorize a disability poetics that might disrupt the normalized body in poetry. The imbricated metaphors of poetics that have at their center an implicit “unmediated physical or mental core unhampered by prostheses, breathing tubes, and electric scooters,” as Davidson writes, also applies to objectivism; only, instead of “gesture, breath, orality, performance,” objectivism has at its core the imbricated metaphor of the nondisabled eye (118). “What would happen if we subjected a poetics of embodiment to the actual bodies and mental conditions of its authors?” Davidson

asks (119). We might in turn ask, what would happen if we subjected the hypothetical eye of objectivism to the actual eye of Lorine Niedecker? But furthermore, how might the notion of subjecting a poetics to an author's disability be altered by our questioning of the assumptions of the always already embodied act of reading itself? One limitation of Davidson's approach is its assumption of conventional reading strategies, strategies that are themselves called into question by Niedecker's body.

Niedecker underwent a major transition in visual ability in 1949 when she was diagnosed with the visual condition of 'nystagmus,' a condition that affects one's ability to control the movement of one's eyes (Peters 100). Though my reading opposes the notion of a direct relationship between Niedecker's 'poor eyes' and her poetry, it is my assertion that the poet's experience of being differently sighted led her to a way of reading and writing poetry that is informed by an awareness of how "The webs of your eyes / Are fastened / To the flesh and bones of you" (Stevens 64).

Such an engagement with Niedecker's nystagmic gaze might enable us to try on a new way of reading her work and provide a critical site from which to reread the objectivist legacy. With its upward ticks and regressive eye-movements, the nystagmic eye invites a reading of Niedecker's poetry that deforms the agency and intentionality of what we might assume to be the 'normal' path of the eye in reading. This unique gaze invites us to read upwards and downwards and across and around in circles, to isolate particular word forms

and to pay attention to the positionality of language in the eye. To deform the text in this way is not only to defamiliarize the culturally mediated process of reading, but to also cast the legacy of modernist poetry in a different light.

## II

“Nystagmus, not mystagmus,” Niedecker corrects Zukofsky in the final words of an important letter dated to 1951, one year after her diagnosis with the condition and her forced resignation from her work as a proofreader (*Correspondence* 179). This keen-sighted and gratifying correction to Zukofsky’s error suggests a connection between nystagmus, the poet’s evolving poetics, her relationship with the New York poet, and the objectivist poetics associated with him. Indeed, there are clear signs in the letter that Niedecker had begun to experiment with fusing imagist/objectivist/surrealist practices,<sup>3</sup> many examples of which can be found in the poetic sequence written ‘for’ Zukofsky’s son titled, “For Paul.” This period of experimentation coincides with Niedecker’s transition to thinking of herself as disabled and culminates in the version of an embodied poetics of perception found in the late poems “Wintergreen Ridge” and “Lake Superior.” If those late long poems represents a culmination of a nystagmic praxis, then “For Paul” is its difficult birth, an interruption in the technical hygiene of objectivist poetics and a

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<sup>3</sup> This is what Rachel Blau DuPlessis refers to as the poet’s ‘fusion’ poetics, a combination of surrealism, imagism, and objectivism, which I also take to have been influenced by an awareness of Niedecker’s disability and the role it may have played in her thinking through poetics and praxis (“Fusion Poetics” 397).



return, for Niedecker, to early surrealist influences which she had never wholly given up.

“I feel I’m on the way to something,” Niedecker writes earlier in that 1951 letter, “especially with the use of lines and words that *look* backward and forward” (178; emphasis added). This statement suggests an intense interest in the contingency of visual form, in a multidirectional and nonnormative mode of reading inspired by Niedecker’s early ‘strong interest’ in the Surrealist “feeling of the vertical more than the simple straight line” (qtd. in *Correspondence* 24). As a hybridization of imagist/objectivist praxis, Niedecker’s multidirectionality functions to destabilize the totalizing effect of ableist assumptions of normative vision. In what amounts to an early formulation of what would become a fully-fleshed out ‘reflective’ or nystagmic poetics, Niedecker writes of co-opting an overlooked aspect of Poundian technique, “Pound talks of his passing between and around images, from one to another, *locus*,” an approach Niedecker explicitly states she is adapting in “For Paul” (177). Niedecker, in a phrase that echoes her later notion of “everything influencing everything else,” describes this approach as relying on a “carry-over in the mind (just an atmosphere)” and goes on to state that she is experimenting in her “For Paul” sequence with “doing that with ideas,” as opposed to images (177).

What is clear from Niedecker’s letter is the degree to which her poetic experimentation stems from a deliberate intention to adapt existing practices to suit her own circumstances. I believe that Niedecker found her body to be

suddenly at odds with her objectivist convictions and that rather than school the flighty pupils of her eyes, the poet embraced an identity that fused her disability with her prior approach to poetry. Eleanor Berry, who studies visual form in Niedecker, conceives of the poet as a radical innovator with form, and employs Adrienne Rich's notion of "the poetry of emerging groups" to contextualize Niedecker's use of it (Rich qtd. in Berry 203). That concept implies a regenerative and resistant approach to form that "draws on many formal sources," and moulds them to its purposes rather than merely mechanically reproducing them (Rich qtd. in Berry 203). Berry suggests that we rethink the conventional ascription of avant-gardism to Niedecker and instead think of her work as resisting the privileged political stances such groups often seem to perpetuate.

As poet and critic Lee Upton writes, "what we have in Niedecker, for all her respect for Objectivism, is a resistance to the certainty to [sic] perceptual approach of some Objectivist strains of writing," going on to claim that "it is through surrealism as practice and as potential that she manages to resist Objectivism's certainties"; it is this 'practice and potential' that is found in Niedecker's approach to visual form (46; 44). Niedecker herself singles out the 1950 poem "he moved in light" as an example of her experimentation.

He moved in light  
to establish  
the lovely  
possibility

we knew

and let it pass. (CW 168)

Dated to December of 1950, the poem comes a little over half a year after Niedecker was diagnosed with nystagmus. It is also intimately connected in theme to the more narrative “Keen and lovely man,” a poem that describes her distressing experience seeking employment after her resignation from her proofreading position, in which the speaker is addressed by a male executive who is considering offering her a job, “‘With eyes like yours I should think / the dictaphone’ or did he say the flute?” (CW 169). “He moved in light,” is an experiment with the same material that engages with her disability in a contrasting manner.

“He moved in light,” is about perception; it is about how one sees and how, Niedecker, as a stigmatized disabled woman, is subjected to the scrutiny of the male appreciating gaze. Yet there is no single clear image in the poem. Instead, contrary to the continuum of imagist and objectivist praxis, it is an abstraction, “the lovely / possibility,” that takes center stage (CW 168). It is this abstraction that recalls Niedecker’s “use of lines and words that look backward and forward” where we might take her word for it and literally read backwards and forwards (*Correspondence* 178). Casting the eye back up the page, we might read from “possibility,” “the lovely / to establish / light / moved in / possibility,” which suggests an equivocation between “light,” the medium of sight and “possibility” (CW 168). As Berry writes, unresolved internal contradictions

like these show Niedecker's "conviction in the value of the poem" as lying in its "capacity to propagate meaning to infinity in readers' minds" (229). Instead of necessarily being 'about' how one perceives, "He moved in light" constitutes a physical act; it is an act of perception, demanding of the reader an enactment of its non-normative reading and granting a perceived contingency as its reward. It is also a willingness on the part of the reader to entertain a performative stance toward the poem's suggestion of textual multi-directionality. By allowing ourselves to be informed by the nystagmic gaze, we might also recognize the limitations of assuming the reading eye to be one way or another. Niedecker's work, read "deformatively," offers us a way to approach the limitations of both a high modernist visual style and the tacit assumptions of disability poetics.

Like "He moved in light," other poems in "For Paul" experiment with visual form in paradoxical ways, perhaps it is for this reason that critics tend to see the sequence as anomalous in Niedecker's oeuvre, yet struggle to explain why. Lee Upton, for instance, views it as a "problematic" sequence that has "the high failure rate of experiments" (49-50). Upton credits this to "what seems to be Niedecker's willful position, at the margins of an *intact* family" (50; emphasis added). If Louis, Celia, and their son Paul Zukofsky, to whom Niedecker's sequence is addressed, represent an 'intact' family, one "not affected by anything that injures, diminishes, or sullies," one "unblemished; unimpaired" then Niedecker "willfully positions" herself as the opposite ("intact, adj."). As opposed to being 'intact' then the poems of the sequence seem to entail a deformity,

they are 'misshapen' in a way that diverges critically from objectivism's ostensibly 'healthful' practice of 'technical hygiene.' I believe it is Niedecker's disability that we should read as informing and enabling the poet's use of form in "For Paul."

Upton singles out the 'companion poem' "You are far away," dated to 1950, one year before the 'nystagmus letter' to Zukofsky, as an example of the 'difficult tone' of the "For Paul" poems. Reducing the poem to "a complaint about her failing eyesight," Upton focuses on what she sees as Niedecker's odd choice of address and "her ability to wedge war profiteering with her personal physical debilities" (50).

You are far away  
sweet reason

Since I saw you last, Paul,  
my sight is weaker ...

I still see—  
it's the facts are thick—  
thru glass:  
a peace scare on Wall St. (*CW* 386)

Marjorie Perloff has remarked that the Paul of “For Paul” is a metaphorical child, a “poetic child, a child Zukofsky may have fathered but which is, finally, wholly Niedecker’s own” (*Woman & Poet* 170). Certainly in “You are far away,” the apostrophic address to the child functions as the grounds for Niedecker’s poem and little else. The final stanza seems to be thinking through an altered relationship of sight to objects, “I still see— / it’s the facts are thick— / thru glass: / a peace scare on Wall St.” (*CW* 386). This ‘wedging’ of “war profiteering with her personal physical debilities,” or *disabilities*, whether one think it successful or not, critiques the false dichotomy between objective reality, “the facts” and the poet’s ability to perceive them, “I still see—” (*CW* 386). This reversal of the usual perceptual hierarchy, the one found in objectivist writing, embodies a critical capacity that is often denied Niedecker.

Such critical capacity has also been denied in the affective stance of the sequence. For Upton, the motivating emotion of “For Paul” is envy. “It is obvious to many readers,” she writes, that the many privileges afforded to Paul Zukofsky, his gender, his cosmopolitan social status, the attention and love he received from his parents, “could have been objects of envy for a writer even as generous as Niedecker” (49). Not wanting to call Niedecker envious, Upton argues that “instead of envy, she attempts an identification” with the Zukofskys (50). Yet, Upton’s dismissal of envy as a viable emotion for Niedecker, “treats it as a term describing a *subject* who lacks” (Ngai 126). Sianne Ngai’s analysis, suggests that envy, an ‘ugly feeling’ is perceived as analogous to an ‘ugly’ physical disability; in

both instances the subject lacks and is denied agential power. What would happen then if we granted Niedecker's sequence the power of envy and disability, treated it, in Ngai's words, as "the subject's affective response to a perceived inequality"? (126). In part the refusal of visual form in the sequence to coalesce into a regular pattern also enacts an 'ugly' misshapen aspect, giving the lie to 'healthful' 'technical hygiene' and suggesting a tendency to visual distortion and deformation already in the work. Envy, like Niedecker's renewed nystagmic gaze may constitute "a motivated affective stance," an alternative aesthetic strategy, rather than "a static sign of deficiency" (Ngai 127).

What "For Paul" represents, in contrast to Niedecker's earlier work in "New Goose" and the majority of the poems written between 1936 and 1945, is an insistence on experimenting with visual form. Before "For Paul" the majority of poems are left-aligned, and after, it is as if 'something gets in,' interrupting the earlier more conventional approach to form. Rather than foreclosing upon Niedecker's poetic ability, the loss of visual agency in nystagmus appears to have opened new possibilities for her poetry, as suggested by her 'masterwork,' "Wintergreen Ridge."

### III

Vivien Morgan Hone, a close friend of Niedecker's from her time working on the *Wisconsin Guide* project, remarks in a letter sometime after the poet's death that "Lorine lived for long years with a very limiting visual handicap" going on to

observe that “the poems continued, regardless,” and reasons that perhaps this was due to “the disease [being] of such a kind that it could be reduced or even cured” (“Local Letters,” 106).

Although acquired nystagmus can be corrected and may even suddenly vanish entirely, this is unlikely.<sup>4</sup> Not only did Niedecker’s provincial position make accommodations for her disability difficult, but Niedecker was herself unlikely to have sought out such ‘correction.’ After almost twenty years of being functionally blind, Niedecker seems to have integrated her vision into her life, but also into a refiguring of late modernist poetics, one that eschewed a stable, totalized ‘image’ and instead theorized her so-called ‘reflective’ poetics.

Some compelling evidence for this is that in 1966 Niedecker mentions her “noticeable failure of eyesight” to her friend Ron Ellis in the context of her evolution as a poet (Niedecker “Local Letters” 97). The mood of the letter is semi-nostalgic; Niedecker is reminiscing about and rewriting her history as a poet. I think this shows that by the late ‘60s Niedecker had indeed come to think of her disability as integrated with her identity as a poet. And, as opposed to Hone’s views, the poems continued and developed *because of* rather than *in spite of* her disability.

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<sup>4</sup> “Acquired nystagmus” is often distinguished from “congenital nystagmus” in the medical literature, with ‘congenital’ being present from birth onwards. Niedecker was not born with the condition and so ‘acquired’ it later in life. It is not unknown for an acquired condition to suddenly go away, but in Niedecker’s case, as I argue, this was unlikely. One speculation I am aware of is the idea that Niedecker’s visual disability and death were connected. Acquired nystagmus is caused by an underlying neurological condition, and it was such a condition that resulted in Niedecker’s cerebral hemorrhage in 1970.



This is an observation intensely reflected in criticism that focuses on the last decade or so of her work. As Upton argues, Niedecker's poems "particularly those written after the Second World War" are inflected by an "acute consciousness of the very frailty of any means of sensory perception" (Upton 34). It is Niedecker's innovation, her shedding and fusion of prior influences, her "triangulation of her aesthetic allegiances" that leads in the late poems, and particularly in "Wintergreen Ridge," to "a particular focus on linguistic experience" as an effect that acts as "a combinatory force that casts words in perpetual movement" (Upton 42). This then is what Niedecker names in that 1967 letter as 'reflective.'

"Wintergreen Ridge" suggests a 'reflective' visual modality that the other poems in *North Central* extend, reflect, and complicate. Niedecker's innovation in the poem is to integrate a suggestion of multidirectionality through her use of a condensed tripartite stanza.<sup>5</sup> Its suggestion of vertical, horizontal, and lateral movements invites the reader to participate in the subjective construction, not just of poetic sense, but also of poetic vision. To read the poem is to decide where to look at and with the poem, and is to reflect upon the contingency of optical agency. One effect of this, as will be discussed in more detail in the following pages, is what Michael Heller has called her "metonymic/visionary mode," which theorizes a tendency for Niedecker's work to visually distort the material presence of words on the page (240). In both Heller and Upton's eyes

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<sup>5</sup> While most critical accounts credit Niedecker's use of tercet's to a unidirectional influence from Williams, it is clear that her employment of form diverges dramatically from that poet's use of it. See: Berry, Eleanor; Augustine, Jane.

single nouns seem to inflate in size, until they displace the conventional narrative or lyric mode of the poem. This, in turn, suggests a connection with disability, where the material presence of language on the page, or of *detail*, as Tobin Siebers calls it, derails conventional reading strategies.

The opening of “Wintergreen Ridge” exemplifies how such multidirectionality and a paradoxical vision of scale troubles the notion of a ‘natural’ way of seeing straight:

Where the arrows  
of the road signs  
lead us:

Life is natural  
in the evolution  
of matter

Nothing supra-rock  
about it  
simply

butterflies  
are quicker  
than rock

Man  
lives hard  
on this stone perch  
  
by sea  
imagines  
durable works (*CW* 247).

At first glance this passage seems to resist a notion of multidirectionality; indeed, one of its most salient features is its insistence on a unidirectional path of reading. “The arrows / of the road signs,” seem to lead us straight down, with the saccades, the little jumps of our eyes, conforming to the conventional reading strategy of left to right (*CW* 247). Even the precisely focused and condensed three-line stanzas, appear to cage the eye in a high-speed scanning motion. Yet such a reading, I believe, is one that has already assumed the determinate linear object-status of this poem. Instead, here, as elsewhere in the poem, the erasure of connective syntax leads to an ambiguous agency, to an embodied multidirectionality that frustrates entrenched reading habits.

On second and third glance, the clipped, neat stanzas instead of providing structure, seem to yawn into the white space of the page, and to send the eye roving. For instance, regressive eye-movements—the name given in the

scientific literature to movements back up the page<sup>6</sup>—are openly suggested by the final line of each three line block, where the quick return across the page seems to result in a return to the headword of the previous stanza as often as it does the next. “Man / lives hard / on this stone perch,” might tip backward to “Man,” resulting in a reading in the next line as “Man / by sea / imagines / durable works,” which has the curiously mimetic effect of stabilizing the syntax whilst also undermining it. Such simultaneity is indicative of a poetics that challenges perceptual norms by presenting multiple trajectories.

Those multiple trajectories are tied to a poetic strategy that, in line with the stated aim of objectivism, wants to render the material nature of language more visible. Yet Niedecker is unique insofar as her work also renders the physically embodied nature of reading as constructed and contingent. “To learn to read,” is, as disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers writes, “also to acquire a new use of the body. It is to recast the body image. When words gain materiality and appear in the world as visible things, reading comes to halt” (124). It is this interruption in the ‘business as usual’ operation of reading—and the ableist assumption of a normative reading eye underpinning it—that makes Niedecker’s work unique. She is perhaps the only objectivist who harkens back to *objectivism*’s etymological root as “something put in the way; an interruption or obstruction; an obstacle, a hindrance” (“object, n.”). And the property of Niedecker’s poetry to

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<sup>6</sup> See Eskenazi and Folk. ‘Regressive’ eye movements, that is, eye movements *back* up the page, actually constitute 10% to 25% of all eye-movements during reading, according to contemporary researchers. I suspect that the percentage may be substantially higher for poetry (the studies have so far all been conducted on prose).

isolate individual words for the reader's attention is, as Heller has observed "most apparent in the longer sequences such as 'Wintergreen Ridge'" (240). In what he calls her "metonymic/visionary mode," this technique "transforms each noun into a large-scale metonymy until what that noun represents is also capable of standing for the world as a whole" (Heller 240). Yet the salience of 'detail,' of the isolated often anomalous and materialistic presence of nouns—what Upton calls "the semantically alien"—may also indicate disability rather than (or in addition to) the mythic 'visionary' ability of the seer. I would argue alongside Siebers that "for words to rise to the surface of the text," as they do in Niedecker's poem, "they must acquire the status of detail, and where there are details human difference is not far away" (125).

To read the poem in this way is to derive a process of interrupted reading that captures the way the poem tends to isolate words in order to draw attention to their materiality; here Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann's notion of 'deformance' is already suggested by the implicit strategies of the writing. To isolate the nouns of the first six stanzas productively highlights the 'nystagmic' character and shape of the poem's embodied attention.

Where the arrows  
of the road signs  
lead us:

Life is natural  
in the evolution  
of matter

Nothing supra-rock

about it  
    simply

butterflies  
    are quicker  
        than rock

Man  
    lives hard  
        on this stone perch

by sea  
    imagines  
        durable works (CW 247)

One might note how few actual *things* there are in these lines and how those things seem to interact with the overall form of the poem. Leaping the boundary of the normalized trajectory of the eye, we read the paradoxically condensed and open “rock / Man / perch / sea / works,” as a shifting and reflective mobile of sense within the original stanza. Though we may also read it as “rock / perch / works / sea / Man,” or another set of a large series of perceptual permutations. And this is not a gleefully perverse ‘misreading,’ but one already embedded and embodied in Niedecker’s apparent poetics.

While this isolating deformation may appear arbitrary, it in fact links to how we perceive written texts and particularly poetry. Because our foveations (fixation points) make up only 1-2% of our visual field, we are forced to jump around a text in order to read it. Our readings are literally leaps of the imagination, physical assemblages of separate and momentary sightings that cohere into a constructed whole. The ableist myth of ‘seeing’ a whole text denies the universal aspect of disability in our vision. We must not see in order to see, and the way

we see is always already mediated by the physicality of how we do. To deform Niedecker's text in this way is also therefore to call attention to the imperfection of the actual eye as opposed to the hypothetical normalized eye that we assume to be functioning.

This reading of "Wintergreen Ridge" accommodates and expands traditional objectivist values of "sincerity," "objectification," and "contingency." Its sincerity is its closeness to the true undecidability of sightedness; its objectification is that of crafting a poetics-optics that enacts the perception of the poem as an object of sight. Its contingency is its representation of the always open and perpetually mobile state of the eye. In his critique of 'deformance' digital humanities scholar Mark Sample suggests that the aim should be to 'deform' and not to return to the original text. I argue that this suggests an object-status for the deformed text that in turn productively obstructs and disrupts our normative assumptions of how we had read the poem in the first place. The thinginess of the deformed text may be closer to our actual experience of reading poetry, something denied by our normative assumptions of visual ability. Our partial and always limited perceptual experience of the text, coupled with our assemblage-like imperfect memory of textual arrangement, denies the transcendent authority of a rested totality, of a pre-formed poem.

One result of this is for the visual form of Niedecker's poem to take on a particular salience. In the previously cited passage, the visual form of the poem interacts with the page in surprising ways. The final echoes of "perch," and

“works,” with their closely parallel syllabic structure is, I argue, typical of an aesthetics in which the visual unit of the syllable takes on relationship that has been little explored. The hard-parallelism of stanzas 5 and 6, on the syllabic level, is no accident and creates a kind of double-vision, in which the lines can be read.

Man  
by sea  
lives hard  
imagines  
on this stone perch  
durable works

(CW 247)

The “durable works,” the objects and things of creation, that are merely imagined, i.e. formed into an image, are surpassed by the perceptual enaction of meaning. The two stanzas overlap in sight, their visually mapped equivalency and contiguity married by the muted lyricism of Niedecker’s attention to sound. This oscillation suggests an embodied critique and revision of Zukofsky’s notion of a “rested totality [that] may be called objectification” (*Prepositions* 13). The lines seem to wobble, to float and superimpose on one another; far from resting, the lines of this poem are constantly active, constantly engaged in motion. Intimately familiar with the properties of reflective water,<sup>7</sup> Niedecker may have conceived of a parallel between the wobbling image on the surface of flood water and her

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<sup>7</sup> Niedecker lived through the almost annual flooding of her home in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Some critics have argued that the natural phenomenon became an essential part of Niedecker’s internal metaphorical sense of the poetic, see Mary Pinard’s, “Niedecker’s Grammar of Flooding.” She was certainly familiar with it enough to remark to Cid Corman in 1965, “No flood this spring, very unnatural” (Niedecker qtd. in Pinard 23).



nystagmic tendency to oscillopsia.<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon has been observed in Niedecker's work; Upton, for instance writes of the poet's ability to "create the illusion of words that appear nearly afloat on the page" making "the page a surface upon which the poem shifts," however it has not been read as a technique inspired or enabled by Niedecker's visual condition (37). To read this in line with Siebers, when these words "rise to the surface of the text" it is as if "a body rises to the surface of the page and moves into the emotional consciousness of the reader" (125).

"Wintergreen Ridge," Niedecker wrote to Cid Corman on Christmas Eve 1967, is "the best thing I've ever done" (*Between your house* 136). Such unabashed self-praise was unusual for Niedecker who proved to be a highly circumspect self-critic at the best of times. It's almost as if the radical mood of the 1960s infected Niedecker and allowed her a freedom at the end of her life she had not previously known. As poet Kenneth Cox explains, "she found herself," in "Wintergreen Ridge," "willing to dare some things that had daunted her and in the process renounce some long-held convictions" (304). There is an element of transgression, even rebellion to Niedecker's admission, and I believe that this is due in part to her recognition of disability's explicit function in the poem's form.

Huge by Niedecker's standards, the ninety-four tercet poem is considerable longer than her earlier work. Michael Davidson argues that this

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<sup>8</sup> "Oscillopsia" is a visual condition in which perceived objects appear to wobble or oscillate. Niedecker would have experience more oscillopsia because her condition was acquired rather than congenital. Often the eyes of those who have nystagmus in childhood have a chance to adapt to and so reduce the perceived 'wobble,' whereas those who acquire it later in life do not ("Nystagmus," *Fighting Blindness*).

longer form permits Niedecker “a wider range of speculation on matters of human and natural history” while also affording the poet a greater capacity to “become more critical” (15). And while Davidson does not see Niedecker as using “longer poems like ‘Wintergreen Ridge’ to engage with the social activism of the 1960s,” they were clearly a liberatory exercise for her and were considered to fulfill the criteria for a radically progressive poetics at the time (18).<sup>9</sup> “Wintergreen Ridge” represents an increased critical capacity in Niedecker’s poetry, one that, through an innovative use of visual form argues for an expanded visual modality.

#### IV

Insofar as this reading argues for Niedecker’s use of an expanded perceptual modality, it challenges the ableist critical tendency to reduce the praxis of poets to a single perceptual dimension. Or, in other terms, to address their work in terms of ‘lack.’ In the specific case of Niedecker, this has been represented by a tendency to identify sound as the “chiefest” quality of her work, as Peter Quartermain asserts, “we are invariably drawn to Niedecker’s amazing management of *sound*” (226; 221). Some critics have even placed the prominence of sound in a compensatory relationship to her disabled sight. In his consideration of what he calls her “preternatural sense of place,” Jim Cocola asserts that “her eyesight was never perfect,” and that “her awareness was no

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<sup>9</sup> The fact that it was initially published in Clayton Eshelman’s *Caterpillar* would seem to suggest that it did fulfill the trappings of a radically progressive poetry. Lisa Faranda suggests that Niedecker did not wholly approve of Eshelman’s work, who had published a long poem in a recent edition of Cid Corman’s *Origin* magazine, which in addition to other things imagined sexual acts between Louis and Celia Zukofsky (page).

less keen for this lack, with the atrophy of her vision leading to the enhancement of the other senses” (71). Similarly, in her essay on Niedecker’s radio plays, Brook Houglum claims that the epistemological importance of “aural perception” in the poet’s work was “likely due to her poor eyesight” (223). And again, so central is this compensatory myth to the Niedecker scholarship, that one finds Penberthy suggesting in her introduction to the *Collected Works* that the poet’s “attentive use of sound” is perhaps “a consequence ... of her poor eyesight and her experience of her mother’s deafness” ([Specific citation] 2).

Sound is of course an essential aspect of her work, but such critical approaches to disability have erased the particularity of Niedecker’s body from her own poetry and are in danger of implying that the basis of Niedecker’s poetry is, to borrow Michael Davidson’s phrase “a compensatory response for physical limits rather than a critical engagement with them” (122). We must avoid reading the poems in this way, while also acknowledging Niedecker’s relative reticence on what she refers to in “Switchboard Girl” as her “eye handicap” (*Collected Works* 335). As Bonnie Roy suggests, in her 2015 article, there is an obligation to account for Niedecker’s “vision, in the particular and negative embodiment whose possibilities are amplified along with, rather than traded in for, the richness of sound” (499). Roy expands Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s claim that aural perception “...tempers the domination of the ‘eye’ and scopic practices” in Niedecker’s work (“Anonymous” 109). Yet, shedding the notion of perceptual compensation, in which Niedecker’s attentive use of sound makes up for loss of vision, we must

begin to consider how Niedecker's critical vision itself tempers the domination of the 'eye'; it is not aurality that critiques or supplants vision, but another form of sightedness. Niedecker develops such an alternative vision, one that renders the physical matter of the eye through the materiality of language, in the poem "Lake Superior." That poem argues for a mode of perception dependent upon both the environment and the readers' visual interaction with it.

As Michael Davidson observes of both "Lake Superior" and "Wintergreen Ridge," their formal qualities, their stepped lines and striated syntax, are tendencies that attempt to "embody something of the geology of the region" itself ("Critical Regionalism" 13). If the poems embody something of Niedecker's perceptual interaction with the environment then they also frame the reader's own enactment of such perception. Davidson's analysis is compelling in its framing of the materialization at work in Niedecker's stanzas. But our methodology asks that we see otherwise. In the second stanza the poet negotiates the rigidity of observed things, with the intersubjective reality of perception:

Iron the common element of earth  
in rocks and freighters

Sault Sainte Marie—big boats  
coal-black and iron-ore-red  
topped with what white castlework

The waters working together  
internationally  
Gulls playing both sides (CW 232).

The “gulls” of this line are the same “gull” in the early poem “When Ecstasy Is Inconvenient” written in “celebration and critique” of objectivist values (*‘After’ Objectivism* 18). That poem, in asking “who knows— / flight’s end or flight’s beginning / for the resting gull?” foreshadows the symbolic use of the bird here and critiques the ableist notion of a static, total perception (*Collected Works* 25). The ‘gull’ as noun is also ‘gull’ as verb. To ‘gull’ someone implies a doubleness, a duplicity that runs counter to the presumption of sincerity in a conventional reading of these as literal birds. Instead, the moving point of the bird in motion comes to represent the ambivalence of poetic perception, the moving eye as it tracks back and forth, “playing both sides” (232). Such a reading encourages an awareness of a less-conventional mode of perception at work in the poem, a strategy put into relief through a deformance of it that leaves only the nouns.

Iron the common element of earth  
in rocks and freighters

Sault Sainte Marie—big boats

coal-black and iron-ore-red  
topped with what white castlework

The waters working together  
internationally  
Gulls playing both sides (*CW* 232).

Stripped of everything but the nouns, this section reveals a visual pattern seemingly contingent upon the microsaccades of the reader in which the definiteness of place, "Sault Sainte Marie," is undercut by two nouns that might toggle back and forth between verb and noun, "rocks" and "gulls." As an example of an imagistic compression of vision, this stanza 'paints a picture' of a scene that is destabilized by the embodied perception of it. Such perceptual 'doubling' is reflected in the final stanza of the poem, which prosaically relates a perceptual failure.

I'm sorry to have missed  
Sand Lake  
My dear one tells me  
we did not  
We watched a gopher there (*CW* 237)

“The poem,” given its geological range and seemingly ‘epic’ time-frame, “seems to end on a curiously flat and unimpressive note” remarks Jim Cocola, quoting Donald Davie who asks “how can it matter, in the last lines, whether she did or did not visit Sand Lake?” (73; qtd. in Cocola 73). Yet, informed by the implicit duality of ‘gull,’ it should be clear how Niedecker’s poem sustains an extended perceptual modality through these lines. The error of vision is a productive error of memory, with the apparently ‘flat’ non-sequitur of her husband’s remark on the ‘gopher’ being a humorous allusion to the absence of stability in perception. “To watch a gopher,” may as well be an idiomatic expression for the paradoxical experience of embodied beings perceiving the world. Like the lines of this poem, the body of the observed animal quivers with attention and is liable to dip back out of sight. The ‘matter’ of these last lines then is not, as Davie asked, whether she actually went to Sand Lake or not, but the intersubjective perceptual paradox that results from such an encounter; in these lines the poem pokes fun at the sententious notion of the poetic image and argues for the inherent imperfection of all perception.

## V

Citing potential objections to their project *W*. Scott Howard and Broc Rossell, editors of *Poetics and Praxis ‘After’ Objectivism* write that “today the function of objectivity in poetic praxis is once again a political issue” (16). But ‘the function of objectivity’ has always been political for the disabled body. Indeed, the use of the word ‘function’ itself implies business as usual for the normal operation of

embodied perception. And as I have shown, what we take to be ‘normal’ for the reading and writing of poetry is far from the “clear, physical eye” of objectivist poetics. Niedecker’s nystagmic poetics unseats the central myth of normative vision: that we have direct agential control over our gaze and that true sight is only intentional, guided sight. “We look to know where to go and what to do,” writes neuroscientist-cum-poet Jan Lauwereyns, but do we do so deliberately? (89). Because nystagmus leads to the disruption of control over the movements the eye makes, the ‘I’ is continually decentered by it. Rather than the ultra high-resolution and smooth tracking shots with which we are accustomed to metaphorize our vision, the body is rudely otherwise. Saccades, or rapid eye movements between fixed points, are instead the rule. We clumsily stitch the world together from narrow, lurching momentary seeings. And not, it would appear, in a particularly agential way. There is no consensus on why our eyes end up where they do. And like the troubled free-will of muscular impulses, the saccadic, nystagmic muscular basis for the gestalt of human vision is in many ways subpersonal in all of us. Niedecker seems to capture something of this in her late sequence “Subliminal”:

Illustrated night clock’s  
constellations  
and the booming  
star-ticks



Soon I rise  
to give the universe  
my flicks (*CW* 288)

Writing about this poem, Language poet Rae Armantrout observes that the “flicks” seem comically slight and may have been written out of despair (106). Yet there is an aspect of embodiment to this poem that Armantrout misses. “Flicks of the pen are small and light” (106). But the flicks of the eye are how we actively make meaning in the world and they are weighty, no matter how insignificant they may seem. The path of the eye is complicated and it is never obvious to what extent a ‘normative’ ‘straight’ reading of any poem is objective. A reading of Niedecker’s poetry that is informed by a performative awareness of the nystagmic tendency of all vision demands that we alter the way we encounter poetry on the page. It demands, in a broader cultural context, that we revise our understanding of our visual access to truth, or the value of “sincerity,” so central to objectivist praxis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONFERENCE PROPOSAL

“We got vision anyhow:” Nystagmic Poetics in Lorine Niedecker’s “For Paul” and “Wintergreen Ridge”

Perhaps no other Objectivist fulfills Marjorie Perloff’s description of the movement’s “wider aesthetic” of “questioning representation” more than Lorine Niedecker. Yet, peripheral in a peripheral movement, Niedecker’s postwar deconstruction of Objectivism remains “oddly blurred.” Though read as resistant to the increasing hegemony of modernism, Objectivism inherited its normalized eyes of “clear vision” from the likes of Pound and Williams. Zukofsky’s aesthetic is therefore a physiological poetic, an embodied optics dependent, in Michael Davidson’s words, upon “some unmediated mental or physical core.” Thus, Lawrence Dembo’s 1967 quest to pin down the movement, would see this core formulated as Zukofsky granting “to the poet, all the senses, but chiefly sight (the eye).”

The irony Rachel DuPlessis observes at Niedecker’s not being invited to this Objectivist summit, thus extends to the poet’s excluded status as visually disabled. Having been diagnosed with acquired nystagmus in 1949 (a condition that leads to involuntary eye movement), and with worsening nearsightedness, Niedecker’s supposed indebtedness to an ocularcentric movement is up for debate. Rather, I propose that Niedecker represents a powerful and radical political critique of the cultural hegemony of ocularcentrism in midcentury.

This essay therefore answers Davidson's call to subject "a poetics of embodiment to the actual bodies and mental conditions of its authors." Moreover, it extends Bonnie Roy's project of returning "a poetic capacity" to Niedecker's "local embodiment" and seeks to establish the politics of her midcentury body of poetry. In what I am calling her "nystagmic poetics," Niedecker pushes back against the enforced normalcy of vision. Resulting in a poetry that resists the notion of a sensory lack returned to normal, and instead draws upon her perceptual embodiment to create new epistemologies of the midcentury body politic in poetry, a "nystagmic poetics."

The foveal-centric optics that Objectivism inherits from its antecedent modernism represents the broader culture's obsession with focus. Yet, as vision scientists who study reading such as Stanislas Dehaene and Ruth Rosenholtz point out, this foveal-centrism is to misunderstand the cognitive and physiological basis for vision in the brain. A nystagmic poetics is radically different. Though not necessarily resulting in blurred vision, as many people with the condition attest, nystagmus radically alters the ableist assumption of perfect focus. Rather than a "rested totality," the nystagmic generates a mobile, saturating sight. A poetic perception that, like contemporary science's description of vision, scans the world constantly and saturates the field of one's vision. Resulting in sight / insights that see beyond perfect sight.

I want to ask what happens when we read "For Paul," a sequence containing poems understood as her "most problematic compositions," not

through the normalized narrative of Niedecker's supposed "extreme courtesy," as Lee Upton suggests, but as representing a motivated, affective stance against the normalizing force of Objectivism? Likewise, what happens when we read the late long poem "Wintergreen Ridge" deformatively? Previously analyzed as exemplary of a poetics of syntactic interconnectedness, how does this highly mobile poem that emphasizes the contingency of perception, body forth a nystagmic poetic? I argue that the saturating vision of nystagmic poetics challenges the steady, perfecting gaze demanded of Objectivist seeing. By applying techniques from deformative criticism, pioneered by Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann, this essay seeks to denormalize the eye in the physiological process of reading. It is my assertion that in doing so we may in fact come closer to accessing the cognitive and embodied perceptual particulars of Niedecker's composition.

CHAPTER THREE  
CONFERENCE PAPER

“We got vision anyhow:” Nystagmic Poetics in Lorine Niedecker’s “For Paul” and “Wintergreen Ridge”

I listened to Lorine Niedecker perform her poetry long before I looked at her poems on the page in detail. Like the poet and scholar Lisa Robertson, and many others, I was fascinated by the *sound* of Niedecker’s work. Perhaps this is why when I encountered the poetry on the page its visual form seemed so at odds with the linear, lyric performance of the recording.

I did want to play the recording — performance being the theme of this year’s conference — but, time being limited it’s probably better if you go check out the whole thing on your own, it’s available on Pennsound. It is, and I hope you’ll agree, in many ways a remarkable performance.

To me it’s as if the power of Niedecker’s intention and the quality of her attention—her eye movements, her way of reading—become almost audible. To be sure, the performance of each finely calibrated syllable seems to enact what Jenny Penberthy calls—in an essay published this year in *After Objectivism*—“a poetry attuned to its production in perception” (67). And that “production *in* perception” is key for me because my approach here is to dig into the specifics of Niedecker’s *actual* bodily, visual perception in order to think about her poetics and objectivist poetics.

Now, I'm defining Niedecker's poetics as 'nystagmic' because Niedecker acquired the visual condition of nystagmus in 1949. Nystagmus is a condition in which the eyes move involuntarily. These movements can be along a horizontal axis, a vertical one, or even in a circular motion. They can also — it's described as leaping or jumping — or 'sweep smoothly.'

This condition would have affected many things in Niedecker's daily life—from driving a car, to simply having confidence in social interactions where eye-contact is paramount—but perhaps most importantly for my study, it would have affected the way that she read, wrote, and thought about her poetry in the midcentury.

At this point I want to read you what Cid Corman had to say about Niedecker's eyes after hearing her performance. For those of you who don't know, Corman was Niedecker's literary executor, publisher, and friend—he's the male voice in the recording. Now he had this to say:

She read poorly, but her eyesight was poor and she was using a magnifying glass to read by and she had never done it before. It was the *music* on the page she explored (154).

Like most folks who encounter a performance of the disabled body, Corman has the best intentions at heart. But—and it is a big, italicized *but*—his attempt to accommodate Niedecker merely “enforc[es]”—as Tobin Siebers would have put

it—ableness “as the baseline of almost every perception of human intention, action, and condition” (102). It is her “poor” eyesight, and the outward signs of her disability, the prosthetic “magnifying glass” that she uses to read with, that come to define her ability. Niedecker was—and I argue, still is—a poet subjected to the compulsory able-bodiedness of some hypothetical ‘normal’ visual poetic performance.

But before I get ahead of myself, it’s important to situate this reading in terms of its relation to Objectivism. The school of poetry Niedecker has been associated with. We are liable to end up in hot water if we throw around ‘Objectivism,’ with a capital ‘O’ and a neat little ‘-ism’ at the end, but nevertheless there is a central thought — as helpfully summarized in this year in *Poetics and Praxis ‘After’ Objectivism*, as “sincerity,” “objectification,” and “contingency.”

But, for our purposes here — I think we can get away with saying that Objectivism was a movement that is best understood as a phenomenological poetics, a poetics based on getting at the things as they are. And—as that might imply—an ethical and perceptual predisposition towards how that is done. Objectivist thought is taken up with finding a fit between the world and the mind’s attention to it. And a fit between world and the eye.

As Monique Vescia writes in her monograph on documentary photography and Objectivism, Zukofsky framed his “new poetic theory in photographic terms,” which reflected “an American culture preoccupied with new visual technologies and their ability to make a record of ‘the real.’” In this sense then Objectivism is a

visually normalizing force in the midcentury. Because as Michael Davidson notes it is based on an imbricated metaphor of the able body, the eye.

As Robbert Sheppard notes, there is a confusion between the eye and the mind, as revealed in Zukofsky's often quoted, "writing occurs which is the detail not the mirage, of seeing, of thinking" - "of seeing, of thinking" that conflation, of eye and mind is not necessarily a confusion - but an intuitive recognition of what modern neuroscience has established. "That," as Jan Lauwereyns writes, "thinking and looking naturally reinforce each other." Even concluding that some of the functionality of the mind is carried out autonomously by the eye. In other words, the eye thinks.

So there is a tension in the objectivist aim of getting at 'the thing' while remaining true to it, because the eye, as an organ of thought, has always already configured and created the objects it perceives.

So where does that then leave our reading of Niedecker? Well, it suggests that Niedecker's gaze might enable us to try on a new way of reading and how we might reread what we know of Objectivist values. It also might work to revise our estimation of how 'objectivist' Niedecker was, and conversely how objectivist the objectivists were.

Turning to my close-reading now, I want to focus on how our reading of Niedecker's work might be informed by an awareness of her visual condition and its relationship to the compulsory normal eye of objectivism.



Described as her “most problematic composition” by one critic, *For Paul* is a collection of short poems addressed to Zukofsky’s young son Paul. It’s has been read—I don’t think there’s a better way to say this—as a kind of ‘creepy’ text. But instead of thinking of it as a ‘failure,’ I want to ask what happens when we come to it on its own terms. The composition of this unusual midcentury poem coincides with Niedecker’s acquisition of nystagmus in 1949 and the increasingly fraught interpersonal relationship with Zukofsky. Zukofsky, it’s probably fairly redundant to say, wasn’t much of a fan of this poem and did his level best to derail its publication.

I think if we read *For Paul* with a performative awareness of Niedecker’s nystagmus then a new reading is enabled. Many of the poems are composed of laterally shifting textures that evoke the notion of “a productive error of vision.” They are suggestive of a brain adapting to the movement of a gaze, which means—because the gaze authors space—a different way of conceiving of “the real,” and a new way of grasping objects.

Niedecker holds up “He moved in light,” as an example—in the 1951 letter where she mentions her nystagmus to Zukofsky—of her trying something new, an experiment in “lines and words that look backward and forward” at the same time.

He moved in light  
to establish

the lovely  
possibility  
we knew  
and let it pass

Here Niedecker's act of perception *is* the poem's production. To be sure, reading and rereading the poem enacts its making in different ways. So, allowing our gaze to be informed by Niedecker's enables us to try on a different way of reading. Enabled by lateral jumps, the gaze can move back across the poem: "Let it pass ... / we knew / possibility / the lovely / ... light ... he moved in." Allowing our gaze to be further enabled, we might move our eyes in a circular motion, skirting the outer edge of the stanza: "He moved in light ... and let it pass," or perhaps, "He moved in light ... and let it pass ... to establish ... we knew ... the lovely possibility."

While this reading owes something to Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann's practice of 'deformance,' it is also radically in keeping with the way Niedecker seems to have held her poetry in her head and the way she came to habitually think and write.

Why is this sort of rereading valuable? It is valuable because it challenges the hegemonic claim to ability of the normal eye and opens up Objectivist praxis to contemporary poetries of textual disruption. By 'denormalizing' the eye in the physiological process of reading we are challenged to rethink objectivist attention

to the materiality of language and the supposed access that the normal eye permits to the real.

In *Brain and the Gaze* Lauwereyns writes of eye movements as a form of extended cognition that are intrinsically tied up with memory and imagination. “The poetic function of vision,” he writes, “has evolved to be extremely efficient in providing us with veridical information about things in the world—to the point that most of the time we can happily remain oblivious to the fact that what we see is the product of our making” (117). I don’t believe Niedecker could remain oblivious to the constructed nature of visual perception, something that I think is evident in her poem “Wintergreen Ridge.”

If *For Paul* symbolizes the inception of Niedecker’s nystagmic way of thinking about poetry then her late long poem “Wintergreen Ridge” represents an evolution or adaptation of her praxis.

Niedecker writes of her reformulation in the late 60s of a “reflective” poetics, in which “the basis is direct and clear—what has been seen or heard—but something gets in, overlays all that to make a state of consciousness.” In a sense then the achievement of “Wintergreen Ridge” is in making a state of consciousness. In the poem Niedecker combines personal memories, with factual research to create a revisioning of her life. Although this late long poem has been praised for its fidelity to fact, on a deeper level its seems more interested in questioning that process of relating to the world. Looking to a mid-

section of the poem we find a memory of Niedecker's mother stripped of the  
connective tissue we might expect.

I suddenly heard

the cry

my mother's

where the light

pissed past

the pistillate cone

how she loved

closed gentians

she herself

so closed

and in this to us peace

the stabbing

pen

friend did it

close to the heart

The interlacing, highly labile stanzas are a movement of memory and imagination and are reminiscent of Laurwereyn's remark that active vision amounts to a sort of time travel, an imaginative fusing of memory and imagination, which quite literally creates the objects we see.

See how Niedecker bridges a memory of her mother's distress with the strikingly precise image of "light / pissed past / the pistillate cone" and her mother's love of flowers. Here, her visual ability seems to be figured as the 'pistillate cone,' which is both the stamenless flower and the nearsighted nystagmic eye that the light 'passes' by. Yet, Niedecker has clear enough vision to create another object from her inner-sight, the tactile "closed gentian" of her mother that is "so closed."

One is also aware however of a deep formal resistance to the way the normal reading eye moves across these stanzas. The tip of each parallelogram block seems to teeter back into the previous, suggesting a radical parataxis at odds with what - on the face of it - seems sincere and lyrical.

What then is it that the poem is objectifying here? I want to suggest that N's vision is of an objectified space, a phenomenon of visual capacity to revise and recognize the constructed nature of the mind in the eye.

To conclude then I believe reading Niedecker in this way opens us up to a consciousness of the constructed nature of perception. Extending this way of

reading out to other objectivist poets then intervened in the ableist assumptions about “straight seeing.”

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