Lorine Niedecker “After the Bay of Pigs”

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Abstract

Ostensibly an oblique commentary on the Bay of Pigs invasion, Lorine Niedecker’s brief poem “J. F. Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs,” first published in 1967, also serves as a reflection on the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath. The poem’s elliptical content is indirectly elucidated by its distinctive form, which pivots around a quotation implicitly attributed—though never directly traceable—to Kennedy himself. Performing a close reading of Niedecker’s poem, this essay situates “J. F. Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs” in its literary, historical, and political contexts while also drawing upon speech act theory in order to gain a better understanding of what is at stake in Niedecker’s “quotation” of Kennedy.
LORINE NIEDECKER “AFTER THE BAY OF PIGS”

JIM COCOLA

Of all the political poetry written in the 1960s, perhaps no single poem packed more punch per word than Lorine Niedecker’s highly compressed “J. F. Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs.” First published in 1967, and included the following year in Niedecker’s collection North Central, here it is as it first appeared in print:

J. F. Kennedy af-
ter the Bay of Pigs

To stand up—
black-marked tulip
not snapped by the storm

“I’ve been duped by the experts”

—and walk
the South Lawn
(Niedecker 1967, 53)

How best to decipher the utterance at the center of this poem? Answers may vary, as will interpretations of this famously enigmatic work. This much seems certain: in appropriating a speech act implicitly attributed to Kennedy, Niedecker affiliates herself with his speech act even as she transforms it, inviting readers to claim and reframe her own poem in turn. What are the effects that spring from this mysterious poem? At the very least, Niedecker seems to work in an indeterminate mode whose ambiguities invite attempts at resolution, calling
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