

## ROBINSON'S REPLY

*The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees* (3rd edn). Ed. Donald Justice. New introduction by David Wojahn. University of Nebraska Press, 2003.  
*Vanished Act: The Life and Art of Weldon Kees*. James Reidel. University of Nebraska Press, 2003. *Weldon Kees and the Arts at Midcentury*. Ed. Daniel A. Siedell. University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

*Peter Robinson*

The most moving moment in James Reidel's grippingly well-told biography is, for me, when a fourteen-year-old girl at Preservation Hall, Bourbon Street, in 1962 exclaims "Daddy, it's Weldon Kees!" But when she looks again for the person who had been kind to her as a friend's young daughter: "the man and his companion were gone." I was introduced to Kees in 1978; it was an ordinary meeting with an author—through his work. A student left a message with an attributed snatch of verse on it: "He might awake to hear the news at ten, / Which will be shocking, moderately." I took the quotation from "Robinson at Home" personally and went to the library. What I found left a list of questions for which James Reidel's long-awaited biography provides some answers. A later meeting with Kees occurred during 1989 or 90, in the pages of the *TLS*, where I read "Looking for Weldon Kees" by Simon Armitage. It ends with the borrowed phrase: "I thought I made out Robinson ahead of me." Armitage's gumshoe pastiche about trying to find a copy of Kees's out-of-print 1962 *Collected Poems* (rev. ed. 1975) resulted in the Faber 1993 reprint—which, their website ([www.faber.co.uk/books.cgi](http://www.faber.co.uk/books.cgi)) implies, is out of print once more. They should follow Nebraska's lead and issue a third edition of this volume by, in Donald Justice's words, "an important poet, among the three or four best of his generation."

One of the many useful services Reidel's well-researched biography performs is to make clear that when Armitage describes how Kees "locked both doors / of his Tudor Ford / and took one small step / off the face of the planet" he's got the wrong make of car. It was a 1954 Plymouth. The Tudor Ford belonged to the Lowell of "Skunk Hour". Lowell is from Kees's generation, and there's an unwanted irony in this car from the signature

confessional poem having strayed into one about the poet from Beatrice, Nebraska. David Wojahn in his new introduction to the poems asserts that they have “little in common with what came to be the prevailing poetic concerns of the coming decade.” Kees disappeared on Monday 18 July 1955. The following year saw the publication of both *Life Studies* and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*— at whose first reading Kees is reported, apocryphally, to have been present. What those two successful public poets have in common is that, however vocal their criticisms of American policy, they demonstrate patriotic commitments to the ideal well-being of their Republic. Wojahn draws attention to Justice’s also describing Kees as “one of the bitterest poets in history” and adds: “the world has seen figures who are arguably far more bitter (Philip Larkin comes to mind).” Yet Larkin, who shared a passion for New Orleans jazz, projects a parodic English malaise. Kees’s may lie in disillusionment with the culture to which Lowell and Ginsberg devoted so much of their poetic energies.

While poets as different as Rexroth and Lowell found themselves in jail for conscientious objection during World War Two, Kees just wanted to avoid the draft. Mind you, his memorably sarcastic review of Rukeyser’s instant war poem, *Wake Island* (“There’s one thing you can say about Muriel: she’s not lazy”) conceals the hours and the stress that Kees put into his commentary for the Paramount Newsreel film of the fighting on Iwo Jima. Some years later, where Lowell was maniacally siding with the un-American activities committees by denouncing Elizabeth Ames at Yaddo, and Malcolm Cowley was organizing her defense, Kees opposed the politicized smear campaign but was not willing to support her wholeheartedly because he couldn’t overlook her organizational limitations. Even so, there’s no shilly-shallying about his occasionally explicit beliefs: “Look, Mr. Dondero, art is not a weapon, no matter how insistently you, the Nazis, and the Communists maintain that it is. Persons desiring to make weapons do not become artists” (*The Nation* 5 Oct 1949); and Kees’s friend Anton Myers reports that Weldon delivered “the merited rebuke of all time” to Mark Rothko who “said he didn’t feel anything when he saw the films of the Nazi death camps”. After “a shocked little silence”, Kees is reported to have said: “What you mean, Mark, is that you’re a moral dwarf.”

Though filled with illuminating detail, Reidel’s book does include the odd inaccuracy. In 1941, Kees is trying to interest New Directions in a selection of Beddoes’ poems “taken from *Death’s Jest Book* and other works in the four-volume Edmund Gosse edition of 1849”. This would have been precocious of Gosse, who was born in that year; his two two-volume editions of Beddoes’ works were published in 1890 and, posthumously, in

1928. There's also some poor copy editing here and there. When Kees decides to call his Lincoln Zephyr "Tiresias", Reidel belabors this family joke about a poor old androgynous car that has "foresuffered all" as also "a nod to the surrealism of Apollinaire". That's presumably the Apollinaire—who foreshadowed the birth of André Breton's movement with his *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. T. S. Eliot's poem is referred to in different places as *The Four Quartets* and, correctly, *Four Quartets*, while within a few lines Kees's New York gallery-owner is rightly called "Pollack" and then confused with the action-painter and spelled "Pollock". Reidel's book will, I hope, have the chance to be as perfect as a second edition.

At a 1943 cocktail party in New York, Kees runs into the poet George Barker who he describes in a letter to Norris Getty as "better than his poems" and a "Noel Coward type of fairy". Reidel confirms this by adding that Kees found him "more likeable than other members of the 'third sex.'" Just how many illegitimate children would Barker have had to father to fend off such a misidentification? But perhaps that's why the Mid-Westerner liked the Englishman: he was more or less straight. In youth, Kees is described as the sort of handsome, svelte, and well-groomed man who would get taken by cruising gays to be one of their kind. His homophobia had a defensive cast. Though it doesn't follow that all homophobics are in denial about their sexuality, such a shadow is thrown across Reidel's biography. He identifies no male partners for Kees, but quotes his alcoholic and recently divorced wife as having said that when he disappeared it was to shack up with a man. Yet she also wrote three years later to the Conrad Aikens asserting that she always assumed he jumped off the bridge. In Bourbon Street, Kees was sighted, if he was sighted, escorting a blonde. The moody, lonesome poet is described as having a secret wound. But Reidel offers no solid evidence for the gay-angle, and mentions in his essay "The Silent Film of Weldon Kees" that Getty was a "masculine" homosexual. It seems unlikely that Kees will be posthumously out-ed.

Armitage's poem also says "There was too much water under the Golden Gate / since the day that dude became overrated". On this topic, Reidel keeps pretty quiet. Despite its subtitle, his is not a thoroughly critical biography. The devoted and enormously knowledgeable editor of Kees's *Reviews and Essays, 1936-55* (1988) and his novel *Fall Quarter* (1990) is not going to give his author a panning such as you can read on Amazon: "this hybrid novel by Kees and Reidel is grossly deficient as either humor or satire". Nor does he handle his subject's setbacks with the cool appraisal of Robert E. Knoll, editor of the 1986 book *Weldon Kees and the Midcentury Generation: Letters 1935-1955*, which Nebraska has just reissued in paper-

back. On Knopf's rejection of *Fall Quarter* in 1942, Knoll notes that "the judgements are understandable" and explains: "Kees's talent was essentially imagistic, in that he captured the tone of a moment and the atmosphere of a single occasion in short forms—poems, sketches, brief narratives." Yet when he adds that Kees "concerned himself with the interior life, the response of a single person to a private world", we can hear the author of "Weldon Kees: Solipsist as Poet" setting out his stall. Knoll's volume of Kees's letters and Reidel's biography present a person with a limitless interest in the goings-on of an anything but private world. Once more, the subject matter of Kees's bitterness may be being underplayed.

What Reidel's approach indicates is that Kees can still seem a cause to be championed. Dana Gioia contributes a useful piece to Siedell's volume on "The Cult of Weldon Kees". Gioia notes that it was predominantly poets who advanced Kees's reputation, rather than academic critics whose agendas he sees as more and more removed from those of the writers. "A cult is a religious community", he observes, "built around devotion to a single deity". The note is struck when Armitage begins his gumshoe piece: "I'd heard it said by Michael Hofmann / that *Collected Poems* would blow my head off". In the *LRB* for 23 May 2003, Hofmann lists "the dominant period voices" as "Gunn, Kees, Plath, Larkin, Hamilton, Lowell, Muldoon, Reid". This is one of those self-fulfilling DIY traditions that some poets go in for—exaggerated, even if the poet Hugo Williams does like him, in calling Kees one of the dominant late 50s or early 60s voices. Isn't that just the sort of evaluation Weldon might have liked to hear, but didn't, in 1955? When a Los Angeles pianist catches his name and says: "Oh yeah, you're the author of *The Last Man* and *The Fall of the Magicians*", Kees adds in the letter reporting it: "This is God's truth." Wojahn asks: "Is Weldon Kees a major poet?" "He is surely a significant one", comes the measured reply. Kees's four Robinson poems and two handfuls of others will likely be his passport to immortality. Still, in his "Silent Film" essay, Reidel is less protective of his poet, writing that when *Poems 1947-1954* came out "poetry had become a sideshow for Kees." He adds that a late review comparing his work to various films pointed to "how poetry had defeated Kees." When the polyartist (as B. H. Friedman defines him) disappeared, he walked out on a somewhat under-achieved and intermittent poetic oeuvre collaged from scraps of influences. The third part of his late poem "The Hourglass" has: "yet only in this way / Is Being shifted and transformed. / Once out of time ..." That's "Burnt Norton"—varied with a dash of Sartre or Heidegger. Reidel notes that both Kafka and Céline have characters called Robinson. One likely prompt may have come from Rimbaud's

“Roman” in which “Le coeur fou Robinsonne à travers les romans”. “Aspects of Robinson” ends with “His sad and usual heart, dry as a winter leaf.” If Kees did get his “sad ... heart” from Rimbaud’s “mad heart”, he exemplified an influence thoroughly digested. It’s the crucial difference.

In his biography, Reidel charts a careful course between over-protecting Kees and turning his book into six chapters of partial failures with a prologue and epilogue to round them out. Still, he can’t avoid telling the story which Wojahn succinctly describes as that of “a restless, agitated soul always on the lookout for the Big Score—which invariably eludes him.” Kees begins as a short-story writer and achieves publication in little magazines, but never produces a collection in his lifetime; he attempts a novel or three, but they fail to find publishers. In the meantime, he’s getting somewhere with poems, going from magazine successes to anthology appearances, to a small press collection, *The Last Man*, and then a trade second book that sells quite well. But the firm is taken over, and *The Fall of the Magicians* falls out of print. The subsequent efforts to publish a third collection with a New York commercial house get nowhere slowly, and his final poetry publication, *Poems 1947-1954*, appears once again from a small press on the West Coast. This is not such an unusual or bad track record for a poet between the ages of 25 and 40, but it was not good enough for Kees—who is described as never getting over the failure to place his third book with a prominent firm. Nor was it enough, apparently, for the parents of an only child.

While not getting his third book published, Kees becomes an abstract painter and does well enough to have a gallery, three one-man shows, and to have people admire and occasionally buy his work. Yet, once again, they don’t quite admire it enough. His friend Clement Greenberg doesn’t roll the log in *The Nation* at the crucial moment. Kees is among the “Inscibles” who publicly criticize the Metropolitan Museum’s selection policy in 1950. However, he doesn’t get included in the group photograph of New York School painters taken on 24 November and published in *Life* on 15 January 1951—according to Irving Sandler’s essay in *Weldon Kees and the Arts at Mid-Century*, though the caption says it was taken on 1 January 1950. Mind you, neither was Hans Hofmann. Kees said he wouldn’t have wanted to be included, even if he’d not been out of town. Then, having not quite made it in New York, and dissipated his energies in manic impresario roles at Provincetown during 1949, he heads for the Coast and there tries to break into the music business as a writer of lyrics for jazz numbers, comedy, and torch songs. So he finds himself on the uncool side of what—according to Roy Fisher—Larkin used to call the Be-bop barrier, and too clever by half to pen the decade’s mindless pop lyrics. He makes experimental movies, writes

an existentialist play, acts in vaudeville sketches, does radio talk-shows about films, collaborates on various social-anthropology projects—and neglects either to paint many more of his nearly successful abstractions, or to compose sheaves of his way-above-average poems. Kees had defended his painting venture by saying that “Shifting from one to the other I don’t get into the periods of absolute sterility that are often experienced by writers who just write, or painters who just paint.” When beginning this phase he describes himself as “embarking, though, on a lot of new departures”. That’s the Kees problem in a nutshell—too many departures, not enough arrivals: “The mirror from Mexico, stuck to the wall, / Reflects nothing at all.”

One function that might have been performed by Siedell’s collection of essays is to offer an overview for this plethora of activities. How good a painter was Kees? How good a pianist was he? What is truly distinctive about his poetry and short fiction? How good an art critic was he? Unfortunately, such questions are not directly addressed in these casually edited, uneven pieces. For me, only the chapters by Gioia and Reidel wholly rewarded with fresh information or insight the time they took to read. The failure of the book’s various art critics to give a nuanced evaluation of Kees’s painting—such as the T. J. Clark of *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in the History of Modernism* (1999) might have done—was particularly disappointing. Friedman can do little more than admit: “In short, considerable art historical work, work of the most rudimentary sort, remains to be done on Kees’s *oeuvre*.” Dana Gioia’s point about divergences between poets and critics is underlined by the manner of Nicholas Spencer’s “Late Modernism and the Minor Literature of Weldon Kees’s Poetry”:

Unable to abandon the modernist belief in the referentiality of the symbol, yet aware of the impossibility of identifying the symbol’s meaning, Kees voices a desolate late modernism through Robinson. Correspondingly, Robinson’s subjectivity hovers between the deterritorialized schizophrenic dissolution of postmodernism and the reterritorialized paranoid terrorism of modernism.

Robinson’s reply to this is that while Kees had problems that may have driven him to suicide, this cannot have been among them. Though it’s not impossible to make a simulacrum of sense from Spencer’s academic junk-speak, the attribution of inability and awareness to the poet that then merely “voices” a vague period mood is itself both “late” and “desolate”. Here’s Kees describing work on “Aspects of Robinson”: “about half way through the writing of the first draft of it, I began worrying about the possibility of its turning chi-chi and pure New Yorker; and my attempt to

avoid that quality set up a lot of odd divisions and strategies". The Robinson poems will likely last because they demonstrate such invention in managing cultural awareness, and, again, a concrete feel for their subject's situations—strategically divided from the "chi-chi and pure New Yorker". The italicized quotation—or slight misquotation, actually—in 'Relating to Robinson' ("*And then a day as huge as yesterday in pairs / Unrolled its horror on my face / Until it blocked —*") is from Emily Dickinson's "The first Day's Night had come —". The poem is dated 1862 in the R. W. Franklin edition. It might be intriguing to follow up the contribution of that Civil War period, fear-of-madness piece to a work which Spencer says shows "the presence of schizophrenic postmodernism's ontological dominant".

Despite his ending the biography with the 1962 sighting of Kees in New Orleans, Reidel is firmly decided on the 1955 Mexico or suicide question. He's sure Kees jumped off the Golden Gate. In a sense, this is the practical option. It saves the biographer from having to follow Ambrose Bierce south of the border in the dangerously vain hope of finding any trace of his subject. What's more, even if Kees didn't jump into the water, what he did do was walk away from being the Weldon Kees whose story we have been following. Reidel gives no evidence for the existence of poems, paintings, songs, or other artifacts, left behind by the same man working under another name. Kees runs out of genres in which to not quite succeed enough for the figure he needed to cut. Wojahn, whose pre-publication praise is cited on the jacket of Reidel's biography, notes that the "reasons for Kees's apparent suicide aren't entirely clear". Was it character? Upbringing? Fate? Sex-life? Money problems? Mid-century American society? Reidel gives circumstantial accounts of implied answers to most of the possibilities. In this, his policy of much more sympathetic description than analysis is successful, at least up to a point.

Discussing the break-through composition of "Robinson", the biographer has this to say about what may have prompted the poem and its fellows:

He had not, however, set aside the intriguing philosophical problems his unwritten novel posed about the impossibility of understanding another human being and the contrast between an expected personality and the real one, which is not real in the first place, but simply a construct.

Kees had written that his young scholar character "has seen and heard too much and knows that the task of fully discovering and understanding another human being—at least this one—is an impossibility." While

suggestive in a dashed off synopsis for a novel Kees may never have intended to write, this is hardly a promising philosophy for a biographer—even one who may be identifying with Kees’s scholar in pursuit of a missing poet. If we accept Reidel’s first “impossibility” idea, there’s no reason to stop at “another human being”. It’s impossible to understand oneself as well. Then, no sooner has the biographer typed the word “real”, than he thinks better of it and opts for “simply a construct”—though there’s not much that’s simple about constructing a personality. Then again, given that we are all impossible to understand anyway, isn’t that exactly why we go about forming understandings of ourselves and of others? Wojahn writes that Robinson is both “Kees’s alter ego” and “epitomizes the conformity of the 1950s” as well as “the decade’s inherent sense of dread.” Did Kees invent Robinson so as to split off some parts of himself he didn’t like, pretending thus that they weren’t him, or did he do the same thing so as to understand and manage better those parts? Reidel’s biography avoids the snare of attempting a speculatively psychological portrait of Kees. Instead, he allows circumstances and events to draw a picture of Kees’s life. In this sense, the philosophy of impossibility saves his biography from one shortcoming, but perhaps pitches it towards another.

The almost complete absence of comment on Kees’s sixteen-year marriage leaves a great void at the heart of the book. Why did his wife Ann not want to have children? Why did Kees write the chilling “For my Daughter” (“These speculations sour in the sun. / I have no daughter. I desire none”)? Spencer answers that by suggesting it had been written as “an expression of reflexive celebration, or at least relief, at its own lack of extra-textual reference.” But in negations reference doesn’t fail when there turns out to be no referent. Did the Keeses ever have doubts about their decision? From the mention of a diaphragm just before their breakup it seems Ann didn’t. Yet there are a couple of stray indications of it on Kees’s part in his behavior towards Pauline Kael’s young daughter, for instance, in 1955. Some friends of Ann and Weldon seem to have taken the poet’s wife for a nonentity, and in his biography Reidel doesn’t have much to add. Yet on the only occasion when her husband is described as having the occasion to be unfaithful, the biographer remarks: “Kees was not the kind of man to discuss whether or not his encounter with Mary McCarthy had continued after the diner episode.” Nor does he give any sustained explanation for Ann’s descent into chronic alcoholism. He does imply that they may have married so Kees could signal he was not gay to the cruisers. Shouldn’t a false and provincial marriage have unraveled as soon as they reached New York, if not before? The couple did separate for some months when Kees first went

there, but whether this was a break-up with a make-up, or an agreed plan, isn't wholly clear. Though Reidel gives barely any explanation for why they were together so long in the biography, his "Film" essay notes that "Ann complemented Kees" and "Only to the perceptive did the knowing looks that Ann gave Kees when he dominated cocktail party talk suggest the symbiosis of their relationship." When they divorced, just a year before the Golden Gate disappearance, Reidel sees it as a relief. His subject is once again making the smart move. Yet Kees falls into a year of depression, stimulant-produced sleeplessness, under-eating, impresario project forming, and two less than satisfactory brief affairs. The biographer doesn't tell us what became of the woman with whom the poet spent the majority of his adult life. There's more that might be known here, and more to understand.

The four Robinson poems construct the pathology of a character from his habits and purchases. In the near absence of nature and community, he is an urban artifact, an alienated statistic—hence the humdrum name—created by the choices made while furnishing a room, shopping for clothes, or passing the time. This is not a human being to understand; it's a "personality" to interpret through a criticism of his socially sanctioned tastes. Yet Robinson, wishfully perhaps, always appears to escape his definitions. Kees was early onto this culturally perceptive and also self-defining theme. "Robinson at Home" and "Aspects of Robinson" appeared in all but subsequent issues of the *New Yorker*. Reidel comments that this "elated Kees, but success also warned him away from writing more. He told his friend Charles Addams that there was a 'law of diminishing returns more exacting on poetry'" and so "Robinson would have to be put away for now." Kees was only to write one more—"Relating to Robinson"—and this reluctance to dilute on the poet's part has drawn imitators to fill a gap that may not be there. Along with "Looking for Weldon Kees", a poem that also features the poet's best-known character, Armitage included six more Robinson poems in his 1992 collection *Kid*. Three further additions to the corporate corpus can be found in Antony Dunn's 2002 collection *Flying Fish*, including "Robinson's Revenge"—where the game turns sour: "*My great grandfather did for Weldon Kees ... and I'll know which day to check the obits / for Armitage*". Even if the law of diminishing returns can bring in its revenges, these homages to the parent-creations still wittily contribute to guaranteeing their afterlife.

Wojahn concludes that Kees's "poetry has won readers more loyal than those supposedly claimed by many major poets" and "We have every reason to expect that such will continue to be the case." Did the Lowell who wrote "For the Union Dead" recall Kees's "Travels in North America" with its

passage on Los Alamos and its “cars that look a little more like fish each year”? I wonder if the Elizabeth Bishop, future author of “In the Waiting Room”, whom Kees describes as “a very nice person” after their one meeting, remembered his poem “Aunt Elizabeth” in which its subject is “Imprisoned by *National Geographics*”? And I can’t help asking myself if that voracious thief Bob Dylan didn’t pick up a copy of *Collected Poems* now and then in the 60s and 70s. Kees’s “The Situation Clarified” is the portrait of a librarian who girates “Through all the latest books” and appears to be killed by someone who gives his name “As Jones. ‘Jones is my name,’ he said.” The last line of “June 1940” reads “An idiot wind is blowing”. In “Relating to Robinson” we hear that “From an uncurtained second-storey room, a radio / Was playing *There’s a Small Hotel*”, and in the same poem its narrator is “Running in sweat / To reach the docks”. Yet whether these are sources for “Ballad of a Thin Man”, “Idiot Wind”, and “Simple Twist of Fate” is likely to be yet one more of the unanswerable questions that float around the name of Weldon Kees.