MORTON MARCUS

My Life with Weldon Kees

The Setting

In 1960, the year Weldon Kees's *Collected Poems* was first published, I was a student of Donald Justice at The University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. I should add that I was a dissatisfied student, not finding in the workshop what I wanted to know about poetry and at a crossroads in my own work. Don, of course, was the editor of *The Collected Poems*, and almost all of his students read all or part of the exquisite, hand-set book my classmate Raeburn Miller and local printer extraordinaire Kim Merker had printed and which two years later I purchased in its trade edition by the University of Nebraska Press. I still have the Nebraska edition with its green tinged cover that depicted Kees, cigarette protruding from the side of his mouth, leaning on a rail, looking out from a rocky height on an expanse of sea. Its influence is as much with me now as the book itself. Reading the poems was a revelation, and a turning point.

By 1960, I had been Don's student for two years in the graduate poetry workshop. Although I was an undergraduate, I had been admitted to the upper division class because I was publishing poems in national quarterlies before I arrived at Iowa. I was also an older student, and like most of my thirty classmates I was a veteran of the Korean War, like them attending Iowa on the G.I. Bill. The difference between us was that most of them had earned their undergraduate degree before they had enlisted or been drafted, but I had gone into the military for a four-year term directly out of high school.

The late 1950s and early '60s were heady days at Iowa. Don had just begun teaching the graduate workshop, and Iowa had become the bastion of "academic poetry," which meant that closed forms and non-controversial subject matter were the order of the day. Personal poetry, soon to find expression in the confessional poetry of Anne Sexton and W. D. Snodgrass, was non-existent. "Safe" themes consisted of reinterpreting or commenting on fairy tales, Greek myths, and biblical stories.

Things were about to change, of course. Allen Ginsberg had published "Howl" in 1955 and five years later Donald Allen's *New American Poetry 1945–1960* would announce a "new"—or at least "other"—kind of poetry that would trample underfoot such academic anthologies as *New British and American Poetry*, which contained poems by a number Iowans, among them Henri Coulette, Robert Mezey and Justice. Allen's "other" poetry—steeped in self-reflection, emotional candor, and Romantic ecstasy, all expressed in open forms—was greeted with venomous vituperation by the workshop's powers that be. Paul Engle, the Workshop's founder, would begin each class reading sarcastically from "Howl" in what can only be described as mock benedictions.

My classmates, by and large, were as impatient with the academic approach as I was. Almost all of them wrote in meter and closed forms, but thematically they were venturing into new areas: social commentary, personal exploration, even the fantastic and surreal. As veterans they had seen too much misery and corruption to ignore the undersides of things, and they didn't want to. All of us were reading everything we could get our hands on and passing what we found to one another, such as the work of two extraordinary older poets living on the West Coast, Theodore Roethke and Kenneth Rexroth, who were never mentioned in the workshop. At this time Robert Bly, a former Iowa student, had come out with his first magazine, *The 50s*, in which he proselytized a non-academic and non-Anglo approach to poetry by, among other things, translating poets few of us had heard of or read in his vigorous new translations: poets the likes of Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, Rolfe Jacobsen, Tomas Transtromer, Georg Trakl, and Miguel Hernandez, and, over the years, new translations of Federico García Lorca, Kabir, and Rumi.

Everything in those years was jostling my notions and my classmates' notions of the boundaries of poetry and what could be done in the poem. But read we did, and talk, talk, talk about what we were reading. In 1960, Don's first book, *The Summer Anniversaries*, came out to much critical acclaim, and all of us read it hungrily and discussed it in detail. We loved the clarity of the poems, the delicate music, the perfection of forms expressed in a seemingly contemporary conversational voice. But for many of us something was missing—a refusal to plunge deeper, to fully engage suggested themes.

Weldon Kees's *Collected Poems* landed right in the middle of this many-voiced cacophony of poetic approaches. It stunned almost all of us, but me in particular. Here was what I was looking for: the contemporary American conversational voice, the relentless look at life, the refusal to compromise the vision wherever the poem might lead, and, despite criticism then and now to the contrary, a sense of the fantastic in both imagery and parable-like narratives. It was easy to see why Don was so taken with Kees. Kees wrote in meter much of the time and played with such forms as the villanelle and the sestina, and his voice at first glance was so clear as to be called "plain style," the unobtrusive use of language in poetry that Don prized. I found more than that. I leaned toward Kees's free verse poems and, like Don, the simplicity of the conversational language. But more than that I saw in the simplicity a journalist's clarity. That's what I wanted, for the poems I had to tell were dreamlike parables expressed in flagrant metaphors that would only be acceptable (and maybe only understood) in the simplest language. So great an influence has Kees been on my poetry and the way I see the world that I took the title of my second book, *Where The Oceans Cover Us*, from the last two lines of his "Travels In North America."

I don't know if anyone else has related to Kees's work as I have. My reaction certainly wasn't then, nor has it been since, the orthodox way of looking at Kees. As a film historian and critic, and someone who has declared more than once that my philosophy of life was founded in part on the film noirs I saw as a teenager, I have found that Kees's poetry and themes resonated with me in ways they haven't with many others. Here are several examples.

The Apocalyptic Vision

No one has questioned Don Justice's comment in his preface to the first edition of the *Collected Poems* that "Kees is one of the bitterest poets in history." Even though he goes on to quote Kenneth Rexroth's comment that "Others have called themselves Apocalyptics. Kees lived in a permanent and hopeless apocalypse," I think neither comment gets to the root of Kees's sense of things. As far as Justice's statement is concerned, "bitterness" is a feeling state. But Kees's nihilism was so pervasive throughout his work that it emerged for me less as a feeling state or Rexroth's permanent attitude than as a vision. For all Kees's mordant tone and satiric jibes at humankind's pretensions, his was and still is as far as I'm concerned neither a comic nor a tragic vision. Rather, it is apocalyptic. His is a poetry of the end of days, more akin to Dante than Rabelais or Aeschylus. His first book, "The Last Man," is full of those scenes or little tales of decaying mansions and drawing rooms with their anachronistic objects and people that resemble the trappings and characters of crude B movies of the 1930s. Even the wooden actors in those films seem to be the personae of Kees's poems and, along with the settings, remind one of the characters in T. S. Eliot's early work. In their more contemporary guise these characters, who would continue to populate Hollywood film noirs of the 1940s, inhabiting seedy hotels and shabby rented rooms, are reminiscent of the inhabitants of Nathaniel West's *The Day of The Locust*.

Robinson and the Eliot Connection

The Eliot reference calls for further examination. Kees refers to Eliot by name in the early "Obituary" and uses Eliot's lines of fragmentary overheard conversations as a modus operandi again and again in his work. The settings of old mansions and anachronistically furnished drawing rooms are also reminiscent of the rooms in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where "the women come and go / talking of Michelangelo." And the major inhabitants of those rooms, isolated, self-imprisoned, ineffectual, constrained individuals are the very characters who speak from Kees's scenes or are spoken about. They are bewildered or unthinking members of a culture whose Whitmanesque vitality has withered, and they sound very much like Prufrock, the nameless woman in "Portrait of a Lady," the relative referred to in "Aunt Helen," and the anonymous male observers speaking in "Hysteria" and "La Figlia che Pinage." All of them inhabit the neighborhoods and houses described in "Preludes," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," and "Morning at the Window."

All are repressed by their upbringing and values, and all are upper middle class. In this light, it is interesting to look at Kees's character of Robinson, the subject of four of his poems. Justice says Robinson is "a typical man," and David Wojahn, in his introduction to the third edition of *The Collected Poems*, calls him "Kees's alter ego . . . a kind of cold war–era everyman." He goes on to say that Robinson "epitomizes the conformity of the 1950s. . . . He is a ghostly, alienated presence." Robinson is alienated, all right, but he is not "typical" or an "everyman." Certainly he is not a member of the working or middle classes, but of the upper middle-class establishment. The furnishings in his living quarters (described in "Robinson") and the snapshots of his days in New York ("Aspects of Robinson") depict a member of the society one would expect to find in the company of a Prufrock, Aunt Helen, and the nameless lady of "Portrait of a Lady." Like them, he is inept, befuddled, out of place in the modern everyday world, a living anachronism, straitjacketed by his upbringing and irrelevant values, unable to act in, function, or comprehend the world around him. He is not even the everyman (really the man of action) he wants to be in his dreams ("Robinson at Home"). And the house described in "Robinson" sounds more like a museum than a home. In fact, like the streets Prufrock imagines walking through, the cities and villas Kees's characters inhabit are further evidence of cultural decay as evidenced by that stunning symbolic image of impotence in "Relating to Robinson," where the supposed Robinson

> . . . stopped and gazed into a window
> Where a plaster Venus, modeling a truss,
>
> Looked out at Eastbound traffic.

It was Kees's Robinson, not Eliot's Prufrock, that inspired me to create a character of my own called Astor, who served as the subject of three poems I've never published, one of which, "Astor In Bed," I've dug up with the others in an old trunk in the course of writing this essay, and find is not as bad as I thought it was, and is essentially, along with the others, an extension of the Robinson poems.

Robinson's opposite number is nowhere to be found in Kees's poetry. But he is in Eliot's early poem "Mr. Apollinax," which describes a priapic foreigner, a thinly disguised Dionysius or Pan, loose among the genteel upper class. The closest characters to Apollinax in Kees are the cynical or spiritually sick old men and their memories in "A Distance from The Sea" and "Saratoga Ending," who, in tone and character, are reminiscent of Eliot's muttering old codgers in "Gerontion" and "The Magi." In many ways, Kees's poetry is an extension of Eliot's poems before Eliot found Christianity. It is as though the lost, seeking side of Eliot, which saw the spiritual meaninglessness in the world before he found salvation and wrote "Ash Wednesday," was reborn in Kees, for whom there was no salvation. In this light it is interesting to look at Kees's "The Hour Glass," his long, very personal meditation on time and history, which in theme and development follows Eliot's obsessive concerns with the same subjects in his early writings.

The Great Poems, the Tone, and the Masks

In his original preface, Justice also asserts that no single poem by Kees "stands out" and that "there are no epics." I disagree on both points. There are several tour de forces in the book that mark them as mini epics. Among them are the just mentioned "Hourglass" and "A Distance from the Sea" and Kees's masterpiece "Travels in North America." The last mentioned, although it refuses to use many pages to accomplish its task and eschews mythic underpinnings, could well be placed beside Crane's *The Bridge* and Williams' *Paterson*. Unlike those poems, however, it pursues one of America's most enduring literary themes—the open road, for it is a travelogue through American life in the mode of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Lolita*, and *On the Road*. It is a sort of verbal documentary film, if you will, that shows the disintegration of American cities and towns into an anonymous, conforming, repetitious series of facades whose depiction amply implies the spiritual emptiness behind them. Kees's verbal control and tone never waver. They relentlessly lead the reader across a landscape of the country that is as chillingly accurate today as it was when Kees observed it sixty years ago.

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There are other poems I returned to again and again in the 1960s, and still do now. In them I have found continuous poetic nourishment. They seem in their parts, and as wholes, flawless. Their strange unvarying tone, tinged with regret and nostalgia, a longing for something never found, or found briefly and then lost, a tone which from one poem to another could turn mordantly ironic, held me when I first read them in what seemed an almost hypnotic power, which still effortlessly draws me into them. It is a strange tone, again like Eliot's in his early poems, and rises, as in Eliot, from such simple language. In many ways Kees writes with the simplicity and clarity of a journalist. But that tone pervades and lifts his poems into something more than news items or dramatic monologues. I'm thinking about the sick old man in "Saratoga Ending," spending his last days at that decaying resort in a poem reminiscent of Eliot's "Gerontion." Or his counterpart, also facing death, remembering when he helped rig the raft that made Christ appear to walk on water in "A Distance from the Sea" (a poem reminiscent of Eliot's "The Magi"). The revelations of the old man in "A Distance from the Sea" may be cynical, but he is spiritually barren, lost in memories that hold no solace, much as the old wise man in "The Magi" remembers his journey to the Christ child.

There are other Kees poems that, in spite of Justice's statement, do stand out and which I would call great—great in terms that a poem is great if the reader returns to it again and again and each time finds renewed delight and sustenance and, over time, discovers nuances in the piece he was not aware of before. All of those elements somehow enrich the reader's life and make life itself seem so much more than it had been without the experience of the poem in his existence.

I've mentioned several of the poems I think are great. Let me add that strange collection of non sequiturs, "The Lives," whose methodology of fragmentation and pastiche Kees uses in various ways in different poems, and which I've copied a number of times. Other great poems, poems that stand out, include the stunning "The Furies," the already mentioned "Travels in North America," "The Hour Glass," and four mask poems, "The Testimony of James Apthorp," "A Distance from the Sea," "A Late History," and "Saratoga Ending." Before I read Kees I had been interested in mask poems I found in the work of Browning, Yeats and Donne—poems in which a persona speaks a monologue or rumination as if from a play. But it was Kees's "The Testimony of James Apthorp," the confessions of a deranged murderer, that led me to write "The Last Words of Vicente Gomez," which appeared in my second book, the one whose title is taken from the end of "Travels in North America." Kees's use of masks also inspired me to write the very different, lyrical "Farm Wife's Dream," which also has more than a touch of Roethke in it. I also used Kees's masks, tones and old world settings to great advantage in two pieces—"Colonial" and "The Governor's Son"—in my first prose poem book, *The Armies Encamped in the Fields Beyond the Avenues.* My last foray into a Keesian mask was "After the End," in which Penelope and Odysseus separately address what life is like for them after Odysseus returns home. It appeared in my last book of verse poems, *Shouting Down the Silence: Verse Poems 1988–2001*.

I even found material in Kees's poems on dogs and cats, and in answer to his description of the innocent ways feline pets spend their days and joyously greet their masters each evening in "The Cats," I wrote a poem called "Pets."

It has been clear to me for a long while that Kees's methods, style, or whatever one would call them, was not the only appeal of his poems for me. Another aspect of what has made me go back to the poems again and again is their refusal to find easy meanings in a seemingly meaningless world, and their unblinking eye cast on a decaying society. Kees's engagement with those questions was relentless. His refusal to take civilization's book, blade or battle cry into the fray, his naked confrontation with those age-old questions, was a heroic example for all poets to follow. There are, of course, moments of redemption in Kees's poems, and they are spoken most clearly by his sorrowful characters as they recall moments of possibility or bliss—that is, the brief candles of memory, the recollections of lost moments when one was full of vitality or experienced the joy of being with a loved one, even if the loved one was admired from afar. This was a tough vision to live with, and in the end Kees couldn't. But still we have his poems, in which he had

> The warmth one bright summer half a life ago—
> A blue sky and a blinding sun, the face
> Of one long dead who, high above the shore
>
> Looked down on waves across the sand, on
>   rows of yellow jars
>
> In which the lemon trees were ripening.

What's left but this to say of anyone.

Morton Marcus died on October 28, 2009, at 73. One of Santa Cruz, California's most prominent literary figures, he taught for 30 years at Cabrillo College. He published a novel and recently the memoir *Striking Through the Masks* (Capitola Books, 2008). Of his ten books of poetry, *Pursuing the Dream Bone* (Quale Press, 2007) was his most recent. A posthumous book of poetry, *The Dark Figure in the Doorway*, will be released in 2010.