

# Weldon Kees and the Poetic Landscapes of Despair

*Mirko Starčević*

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the efforts to renew an interest in the poetry of Weldon Kees, a more or less forgotten American poet of late modernism. The main argument of this paper is that Weldon Kees, while a belated poet of modernism, successfully swerved away from the earlier poetics of modernism and proved capable of constructing a unique poetics of despair and alienation. In many ways, an heir of Hart Crane's tragic sense of life, Kees' misreading of Hart Crane was highly fertile and crucially conducive to the creation of his own visionary poetics. In the first part of our discussion, a more generalized overview of Kees' poetry is developed, while in the second part, we analyze the four Robinson poems which constitute the nucleus of Kees' existential aesthetics. Notwithstanding the fact that despair is a ubiquitous presence in Kees' poetry, it does not manifest itself as an inhibiting force; on the contrary, while despair is inextricably linked to his tragic fate, it also acts as a major creative impetus, which helped Kees express his relationship to the world and, consequently, his place in it.

**Keywords:** Weldon Kees, poetry, Robinson, Hart Crane, despair, alienation

Weldon Kees is now a mostly forgotten poet. His name occasionally graces a page in an anthology of 20th-century American poetry and has predominantly become the subject matter confined to the arcana of literary studies. During his lifetime, three volumes of his poetry were published, 'The Last Man' (1943), 'The Fall of the Magicians' (1947), and 'Poems' (1947-1954). Donald Justice, a poet and one of the Kees revivalists, points out in the 1960 'Preface' to 'The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees,' of which he is the editor, that none of the three volumes aforementioned are 'at present easily obtainable' (xiii).

Kees harboured high literary and artistic ambitions – as a poet, a novelist, and a painter – and notwithstanding the fact that his literary star has sunk into obscurity, his poetic output has never been swallowed by the ravenous tendencies of time to the same extent his contributions as a novelist have. It is important to mention that his failing to make his novel, entitled *Fall Quarter*, see the light of day launched him into a swirling vortex of self-doubt which became his daily bread and, not infrequently, made him likewise question the nature of his poetic quest.

He evinced great despondency over having been thrown into the midriff of what may be termed late or 'residual' modernism, which was marked by the afterglow of aesthetic sheen found in the works of T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens. Kees' poetry had often been dismissed as a repository of imitative proclivities, as in being overly deferential towards the works of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Kenneth Fearing, W. H. Auden, Arthur Waley, and others.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, Kees felt great reverence for the preceding generation of poets and wrote, in a sardonic tone innate to him, in the 1946 edition of *Partisan Review* that "If that was a Wasteland and they were the Lost Generation, then what is this moldy milieu, in which we find ourselves, and what are we" (qtd. in Siedell 86). Notwithstanding this observation, it is a facile conclusion to regard Kees' poetry as a product of an indolent epigone. While Kees did share a view with the early modernists that poetry "must be rooted in a tragic sense of life," (qtd. in Reidel 260), entrenched in the High Romantic themes of belatedness and the apparent lack of aesthetic expansiveness, it was the combination of the tragic sense of life as a poetic mode and the tragic sense of life which he endured that rendered his poetic output so unique.

On account of his tragic life, Kees' name is often encountered in the company of John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz, and Hart Crane. Of these names here mentioned, it is Hart Crane who exerted the greatest amount of influence upon Kees the poet. Herein lies the reason why calling Kees' an imitator of the earlier modernists like T. S. Eliot or W. H. Auden is erroneous, for, like Hart Crane, Kees envisions the world not so much as the wasteland without hope

1 For further discussion of the multifarious influences upon Kees' poetry, see Nelson 844.

as the world which fails to step upon the path of self-understanding and cannot internalize the meaning of hope in the first place. As David Wojahn writes, in the world of Weldon Kees, “the apocalypse has run its course” (vii), the most tragic has already transpired and the course of destiny cannot ever be reversed. There is no place for the voice seeking for the light of “spiritual renewal” (vii). It is swallowed in the cacophony of limitless chaos, in the cosmos shattered into bits and pieces, barren from and to its ailing core.

The imaginative landscapes inherent in the poetry of Weldon Kees take on a form of a “slashed world” (3), as he describes it in his poem, entitled “A Salvo for Hans Hoffmann,” a poem which indirectly represents his affirmation of abstract expressionism along with its penchant for “nonhierarchical, all-over composition,” (Yau 29) where all images are of corresponding importance.<sup>2</sup> The poet very curiously and, I believe, quite purposefully employs the adjective *slashed*, for it mounts a powerful image of the world fragmented, not unlike a mirror which can never be glued back to its former faultless sheen. Thrown into existence thus to be here with “our rootless feet” (“Variation on a Theme by Joyce” 2), we are left to flounder in a perpetual transition between two levels of Being-in-the-World, that is, swinging eternally, as Kees understood it, between summer and fall, warmth and cold. Kees names the first state of Being-here as “once it was summer” and the other “almost Fall” (“White Collar Ballad” 21). The two adverbs, *once* and *almost*, imply an intransigent midway between the two finalities, incarnated in both a spatial and temporal dislocation from the realm of the presently present. Summer and fall exist for the poet only ideationally, the former as an echo reverberating from the past and the latter beckoning forth only as a possibility and a promise of an iron year. In the same poem, Kees declares that there “isn’t any season now” (22); it is time seasonless. Reality no longer conscripting to the ordinary claims of time forces Kees to ask the following question: “Where is the grave / Of time?” (“To the North” 12-13) The state of existential limbo, between the feast of light and the abyss of dusk everlasting, spells out an ominous proposition that “there isn’t any love” (“White Collar Ballad” 6), that “there wouldn’t be any love” (18), that “there won’t be any love” (24).

These is an underlying darkness in the poetry of Weldon Kees that led to its being labelled as bitter. One of the best-known proponents of this school of thought is Kenneth Rexroth, himself an accomplished poet, abstract painter, and Kees’, I hesitate to say, friend. Even though Rexroth praises Kees’ poetry on

2 Weldon Kees was also an abstract painter of non-negligible reputation. Hans Hoffman to whom the poem is dedicated was a great European abstract painter. He held Weldon Kees’ poetry and artistic work in high regard: “*You are as great a poet as you are a painter. I found your exhibition fascinating. It’s poetry in color. That it is what painting should be*” (*Weldon Kees and the Midcentury Generation* 117).

account of its authenticity – while, nonetheless, regarding it as overly steeped in the eyeless emulation of Eliot’s “The Waste Land” – he ultimately finds a temptation to call Kees a bitter poet unduly overwhelming. Rexroth proceeds along the same path in writing that while “others have called themselves Apocalyptic, Kees lived in a permanent and hopeless apocalypse” (qtd. in Justice xvi). Donald Justice, who to a large degree reciprocates Rexroth’s estimation of Kees’ verse as being bitter, attributes Kees’ purported bitterness “to a profound hatred for a botched civilization, Whitman’s America come to a dead end on the shores of the Pacific” (xv). Calling Kees’ poetry bitter is, in my view, a case of oversimplified mis-reading, for bitterness implies one’s emotional investment with the world one feels embittered about.

One would hardly be disinclined to recognize in this description the foundational principles of resignation, yet resignation just like bitterness hints at some form of involvement with the world, whereas Kees’ poetry evinces the mood of coldness, alienation, as the incipient stage of Being-here, which transpires and establishes itself prior to the arousal of one’s emotional surrender. Kees’ existential bent is that of surrendering in the face surrendering.

He is likewise intimately preoccupied with the themes of “decay, imprisonment, moral and physic” (Nelson 830). In “Early Winter,” in particular, Kees intimates a universe that is replete with the daemon of decay and confinement, of alienation and of the metaphysical nothing. In the very first verse of the poem, he affirms the universe as being in a disjointed relationship to any form of expectation, conviction, and anticipation. The summer of life is for him a trunkless construct, for “memory of summer is winter’s consciousness” (1). In the rest of the poem, winter’s consciousness takes over the atmosphere, rendering it a servant to the unforgiving cold of despair and despondency:<sup>3</sup>

But the room is cold, the words in the books are cold;  
 And the question of whether we get what we ask for  
 Is absurd, unanswered by the sound of an unlatched door  
 Rattling in wind, or the sound of snow on roofs, or glare  
 Of the winter sun. What we have learned is not what we were told.  
 I watch the snow, feel for the heartbeat that is not there. (“Early Winter” 7-12)

3 Despair, in relation to Kees’ life and poetry, is taken as an ontological – not psychological – state of Being, in that it signifies the manner in which “with infinite passion the self by means of imagination despairs over something earthly” (Kierkegaard 348) and is, thus, interfused with the falling apart within the self of the Laws of Eternity. In other words, despair projects forth the ontological disorientation within the innermost Being of one who despairs, which, moreover, means that despair correlates with one’s inability to become the self that one was perhaps intended or expected to become.

The world without a heartbeat is reminiscent of a barren canvas, of a heart spilling emptiness, exuding the blossoming of anguish. In other words, the central stage is usurped by the withdrawal of Being, an ontological mode which is closely related to nihilism. The rambling mind has no way of avoiding being shattered upon its self-generating shores of destruction, as Kees so powerfully tells us in his poem “Covering Two Years”:

This nothingness that feeds upon itself:  
Pencils that turn to water in the hand,  
Part of a sentence, hanging in the air,  
Thoughts breaking in the mind like glass,  
Blank sheets of paper that reflect the world  
Whitened the world that I was silenced by. (1-6)

The image of pencils turning to water brings to mind John Keats’ famous epitaph engraved upon his tombstone: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” The theme of failure, pre-ordained as it appears in these words, assumes a pivotal role in the incipient stages of Kees’ poetic career; and yet rather than focusing the eye on himself alone, he casts the judgment upon the society as a whole, upon the society that is inimical and uncharitable to the exigencies of one’s poetic calling. Silence regnant in the world is not pleasurable; it is profoundly deafening, devoid of becalming contrasts, lacking dialectical hues and shades.

Hart Crane writes in his famous poem “Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge” that “only in darkness is thy shadow clear” (38). Only in the dungeons beyond the reach of the world does the quintessence of meaning acquire genuine prominence. Although hope is not what Kees is after, he nonetheless longs for the conditions propitious for the birth of a creative spark. It does not come as a surprise that he chooses a passage from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Marble Faun* as an epigraph for his final book of verse: “Those dark caverns into which all men must descend, if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasure of existence” (87). The eye habituated to the tenebrous forms of nocturnal existence comes to appreciate the delineative and inventive force of the night. Kees, notwithstanding his indebtedness to Crane, goes a step further, encountering in the undue adulation of night a paradox, for the presence of night admits to the presence of day, albeit as absently present. In Kees, night becomes day and day becomes night, neither overruling the other which renders the middlemost point of their mutual essence the innate force of creative divergence.

We will now direct our attention to the centre holding together the pivotal part of Kees’ opus, to the four poems which feature a protagonist named Robinson. The quartet of Robinson poems is significant for two different but not

unrelated reasons. The first and foremost reason which renders these poems remarkable is the fact that they represent Kees' carving out of his manifesto of despair, delineating and keeping aesthetically genuine the arc of his imaginative undertaking. The four poems were written within the span of six years: "Robinson" (1945), "Aspects of Robinson" (1948), "Robinson at Home" (1948), and "Relating to Robinson" (1951).

The poems are highly autobiographical and their protagonist has been the focal point of a multitude of differing opinions as to his true identity and hermeneutic value. Most frequently and predictably, Robinson has been read as a Robinson Crusoe double, "the daemon of solitary existence," (408) as Bloom eloquently phrases it. Still others recognize in the figure of Robinson the undertones of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's novel "Journey to the End of the Night," where the protagonist, likewise named Robinson, functions as the author's double. Merlin Thomas in his "Louis-Ferdinand Céline" writes that Robinson is "to be thought as an average, deluded human being who never really has a chance and who only realizes this dimly very late on" (55). This brief description aligns with the mood evinced by Kees' Robinson, yet a slight misalignment between the two persists, and it needs to be highlighted. The surrendering of Kees' Robinson to the heights of despair is so profound that the concept of chance never enters the dominion of his thought.<sup>4</sup> His horizon is indeed one of uncertainty, a blank canvas deprived of hope, neither implied nor intimated.

In "Robinson," Kees fronts us with a vanishing presence. In the very first line, Kees tells us that "Robinson has gone" (1). The verb *gone* is ambiguous. We are left guessing if Robinson has only left or died. This foreshadows Kees' own fate, for just before his disappearance in 1955, he had spoken of leaving for Mexico. His car having been left on the approach to the Golden Gate Bridge, it remains to this day unknown whether he indeed travelled to Mexico or committed suicide by jumping from the bridge – though the latter version has been heavily favoured, bearing in mind that Kees had been obsessed with the topic of suicide and was by his peers deemed quite an expert on it. That the world is gray seems a statement independent of Robinson's disappearance although it might have factored heavily

4 I employ the phrase *the heights of despair* as a reference to the work of the Romanian essayist and philosopher Emil Cioran, whose work "On the Heights of Despair" explores the ontological moods of despair and hopelessness, of alienation and angst, of futility and decay. Cioran maintains that "the terrifying experience of death, when preserved in consciousness, becomes ruinous," and yet, talking of death, you can "save part of your self" (4). Nevertheless, when lingering for too long upon the mysterious themes of death, "something of your real self dies because objectified meanings lose the actuality they have in consciousness" (4). The best one can hope for is to sublimate the death-drive in the form of creative endeavor. This very act of creative sublimation was Kees' great accomplishment, for he proved at one and the same time creatively most daring, unapologetic, and original, when "in the throes of death" (4) and existential uncertainty.

in his having taken off. There is a broken world imaged in “the mirror from Mexico” (5), an indirect allusion to Hart Crane, who spent the last year of his life in Mexico and committed suicide by jumping from the stern of the steamship *Orizaba* as it was making its way from Mexico to the U. S.

In the second tercet of the poem, the motif of blankness charges across the poem’s canvas:

The pages in the books are blank,  
The books that Robinson has read. That is his favorite chair,  
Or where the chair would be if Robinson were here. (12-14)

The books whose pages are blank is a metaphor for books which kindle no interest in Robinson; they could easily have been books yet unwritten, a desideratum of the failed poet; they could also have been the books circumnavigating the rugged shores of Robinson’s own life. The curious switch from the ontological to the mundane in the poem’s reference to the anatomy of Robinson’s room yet again hauntingly predicts future events in Kees’ life. Following Kees’ vanishing act, his very good friend, Michael Grieg was informed by the California Highway Patrol about the finding of his friend’s car. Thereupon Grieg with another friend and two police officers entered Kees’ apartment, making a note of things as they were laid out. Grieg had visited Kees’ apartment shortly before his disappearance which means his was a privileged insight into Kees’ last few days, affording him, at the same time, an exceedingly advantageous vantage point for picking up any hints that might have proven valuable in making sense of his friend’s sudden though not wholly unexpected vanishment:

The Jack Daniel’s had not been touched. Sheet music was spread across the upright piano. There was a pile of reel-to-reel tape that Kees had made with his musician friend ... Dostoevsky’s *The Devils* ... was placed near his bed beside another book, Unamuno’s *Tragic Sense of Life*. A note lay on the telephone table ... In the kitchen, beside a bookcase that Kees kept there, stood a plate of congealed milk for his cat, Lonesome, which turned out to be the only living thing in the apartment. (Reidel 5)

“Robinson alone provides the image Robinsonian,” is one of the most haunting lines in the entire quartet of poems. The image is that of emptiness and absence. All the things he left behind in his apartment are a telling reminder of that ardent absence, the last vestige of his presence. Robinson’s reality has changed beyond re-pair while the outside world takes no note of the event. It is this tragic fact which obsessively occupies Kees, the inability of people to fundamentally relate to one another, to feel another’s grief and joy alike. As the curtain of night is lifted,

the light of day protrudes unto the scene but nothing appears changed. Kees masterfully captures this sobering indifference of both nature and civilization, nay, of the cosmos, to the disappearance of the forlorn individual, thus prefiguring the dominant theme of the last Robinson poem, "Relating to Robinson":

Outside, white buildings yellow in the sun.  
 Outside, the birds circle continuously  
 Where trees are actual and take no holiday. (17-19)

With the image of white buildings Kees apostrophizes Hart Crane again. Harold Bloom astutely points out that for Hart Crane "white buildings gradually answer day. For Kees they yellow silently" (409). However, I argue that unlike Hart Crane's white buildings, Kees' white buildings never undergo the spring of renewal. They do not become yellow, not even silently. What prevails is the limbo of blank indifference, symbolized by the trees which continue to be present, taking no time off, standing there resolutely, a firm signature of nature's detachment from the sufferings of a tortured consciousness.

In the second Robinson poem, entitled "Aspects of Robinson," Kees' fascination with Hart Crane assumes a central role less tentatively. Robinson apparently succumbs to mental torpor, designated by Harold Bloom as *acedia*, which he beautifully defines as "the malady of monks ... the sin of being sullen in the sweet air" (408). The air is sweet, for the poet shares his mental landscape with the imaginative landscape of Hart Crane, a poet he looks up to. Wandering around New York, he comes upon places which are related to Hart Crane. Robinson stands on a roof above the Brooklyn Heights, a residential neighbourhood where Hart Crane lived in the 1920s. In one of the photographs, Crane stands on a roof of a building with the Brooklyn Bridge, his grandest of muses, towering ever unspent in the background. Crane continues to loom large in the rest of the poem, most prominently in the line: "Here's where old Gibbons jumped from, Robinson." This is a clear allusion to Hart Crane's suicide even though he did not end his life by jumping from the bridge but from the stern of a steamship. It is worth mentioning that the line could also be referring to Hart Crane's poem "To the Brooklyn Bridge," to a quatrain which reads like a dirge written unto the spell-bound bedlamite gazing into the vast abyss below, unseen by the busy, mocking, and uncaring passers-by:

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft,  
 A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,  
 Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,  
 A jest falls from the speechless caravan. (17-20)



The poem is abounding in the elements of prosaic mundaneness, such as the reading of a daily newspaper or visiting local restaurants. For all that, beyond the mirage of such effortless preoccupations lies the hidden yet vibrating abyss of despair. Robinson, well-dressed as he is, in "Glen plad jacket, Scotch-grain shoes / Black four-in-hand and oxford button down" (21-22) is shattered by the blandness within, where "his sad and usual heart, dry as a winter leaf" (25) lingers on unheard and unseen; a possible allusion to Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Richard Cory," whose protagonist appears not to be possessed by a single agonizing thought, while the final truth does not correspond to the impression of appearance, which the tragic end of the poem so poignantly showcases.

In the third Robinson poem, "Robinson at Home," our hero inhabits the land of mental oblivion. This mental state appears to be his true home, inferno and heaven all at once. This is where "the moonlight and the odors of the street / Conspire and combine toward one community" (3-4), the community of light mingled with darkness, and vice versa. The rooms which keep Robinson in concealment from the world are "Bleached, wan, and colorless this light, as though / All the blurred daybreaks of the spring / Found an asylum here" (6-8). The meaning of the place transcends its immediate physical dimensions, projecting forth an overwhelming ontological mood of indifference. And while "his old desire / To die like this has known a lessening," he has not shed the "coldness that he has to wear" (13-14). He is caught between the extremity of a frenzied dream and silence which meets him upon awakening. Even silence in Robinson's world becomes white noise, the cause of inner strife. It is anything but comforting for, like a disturbing presence of the other, "it drones like wires far beyond roofs / And the long curtains blow into the room" (26-27). The movement of air beyond the walls heralds the fore-knowledge that he has forfeited the self-within, in the sense that he is gripped by the prepossessing drive to be rid of the self. The curtains, introducing and concluding the poem, are indicative of Fate's cruel decrees. At first, the curtains stand aside, "drawn back" (1), and are then transformed into the very shadow which blocks the shining of the light of life into Robinson's rooms and the voice which so desires to express this razing anguish. The rooms close for Robinson, the final refuge from indifference become its unalterably powerful progenitor.

In the last Robinson poem, "Relating to Robinson," the poet takes to the streets again, following Robinson, who is constantly a dozen steps ahead of him. The two share a brief interval of spatial reciprocity: "We were alone there, he and I, / Inhabiting the empty street." (7-8) Together they are working out the kernel of the jigsaw of emptiness. Soon enough the poet, in a rare spell of lucidity, is disabused of his hallucination, realizing that it is not Robinson he sees, as he is "out of town" (14). In spite of knowing that Robinson "summers at a place in Maine / Sometimes on Fire Island, sometimes the cape," he cannot resist the urge to call out "Robinson!"

(15- 17). Seamlessly, the poet is submerged anew in his pursuit of the seemingly familiar silhouette. This time the *doppelgänger* is uncannily rendered even more indecipherable in spite the unprecedented proximity of his facial features:

Turning my head to search is face,  
His own head turned with mine,  
And fixed me with dilated, terrifying eyes  
That stopped my blood. His voice  
Came at me like an echo in the dark. (19-23)

The poet apparently becomes the unknown other as the delimiting bounds between the two passing entities emerge as seemingly inseparable. As he turns towards Robinson, he meets himself in the eyes of the other, over-hearing his own voice which is telling him that “an empty paper floats down at the last” (27). In an overt yet fragmentary reference to Emily Dickinson’s poem “The First Day’s Night,” the poet confesses to finding unbearable the curtain of despair having been made potent by the veil of hallucination. The fragment is broken by the poet’s descent deeper into a hallucinatory state. “I had not certainty / There in the dark, that it was Robinson, / Or someone else” (32-35). Uncertainty, as Norris Getty observed, is the poem’s strength, and Kees himself in a letter expresses gratitude to Getty for having revised one of the final lines in an early draft of the poem, thus singling and crossing out the line, “The man had looked / Enough like Robinson to be his twin.” The last version of the poem refrains from making a pronouncement as to the man’s true identity which consequently ameliorates the overall essence of the poem. Indeed, Kees’ ability to be at one with uncertainty is one of the main strengths of his poetry.

The poet as Robinson’s double closes in on the water, and Harold Bloom, who suggests that “Death by water ... haunted Kees” (411) offers a natural *dénouement* to the poem, providing us with another reference to Hart Crane and with the plaintive portents of Kees’ own tragic fate. John T. Irwin writes that the ending of the poem seems to display “the return of the speaker’s consciousness to a melancholy if precarious equilibrium after the crisis of his ventriloquizing the words of his double” (94). The poet, in the same fashion as Kees, hurries West, where he sees the boats that move “silently” and “the low whistles” (“Relating to Robinson” 39-40) blowing hauntingly. This signifies the movement from the personal to the impersonal, from the human to the inhuman, towards the shadowy elements belonging to the cruel sea.

The four Robinson poems round off Kees’ preoccupation with the language of dejection and solitude and, as Sharon Mayer Libera points out, with “an unbearable tension between the insistent presence of things and their unsubstantiality” (156).

Nothing in these poems yearns to understand anything beyond itself. And though Kees looked “to build a quiet city in his mind: / A single overwhelming wish” (“To Build a Quiet City in His Mind” 1-2), he ultimately fails to achieve the goal, succumbing to the dread of disquietude and to the loss of his ontological identity. He has ultimately learned only “to speak to silences of altered rooms, / Shaken by knowledge of recurrence and return” (“Covering Two Years” 12-13). The recurrence he speaks of is the recurrence of the invariably identical, of that which is devoid of its genuine *haecceitas*, hence failing to insert colour into life, colour which he so craves for but ever eludes him. The image Robinsonian in the end triumphs over the false sense of hope and takes for its own the idiom of despair.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bloom, Harold. *Possessed by Memory: The Inward Light of Criticism*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2019.
- Cioran, Emil. *On the Heights of Despair*. The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Crane, Hart. *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane (Centennial Edition)*. Liveright, 2001.
- Irwin, John T. *The Poetry of Weldon Kees: Vanishing as Presence*. JHU Press, 2017.
- Justice, Donald. “Preface.” *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees (Third Edition)*, by Kees, University of Nebraska, 2003, pp. xiii-xvii.
- Kees, Weldon. *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees (Third Edition)*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Kees, Weldon. *Weldon Kees and the Midcentury Generation: Letters, 1935-1955*, edited by Robert E. Knoll, University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Libera, Sharon Mayer. “The Disappearance of Weldon Kees.” *Ploughshares*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1979, pp. 147-159.
- Nelson, Raymond. “The Fitful Life of Weldon Kees.” *American Literary History*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1989, pp. 816-852.
- Reidel, James. *Vanished Act: The Life and Art of Weldon Kees*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Siedell, Daniel A. *Weldon Kees and the Arts of Midcentury*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Thomas, Merlin. *Louis-Ferdinand Céline*. New Directions Publishing, 1980.
- Wojahn, David. “Introduction.” *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees (Third Edition)*, by Kees, University of Nebraska, 2003, pp. v-ix.
- Yau, John. *The Passionate Spectator: Essays on Art and Poetry*. University of Michigan Press, 2006.

*Mirko Starčević*  
Kranj  
mirko.starcevic@gmail.com



## **Weldon Kees in pesniške pokrajine brezupa**

Namen pričujoče razprave je prispevati k naporom, ki si prizadevajo obuditi zanimanje za poezijo Weldon Keesa, bolj ali manj pozabljenega ameriškega modernističnega pesnika. Glavna teza članka je, da se Weldon Kees, navkljub temu, da je zapozneli pesnik modernizma, uspešno odkloni od predhodne poetike modernizma in ustvari edinstveno poetiko brezupa in odtujenosti. V prenekaterem pogledu je Kees naslednik tragičnega občutja življenja, ki ga najdemo pri Hartu Cranu, vendar se njegovo mimo-branje Crana izkaže za plodovito in ugodno pri ustvarjanju njemu lastne vizionarske poetike. V prvem delu razprave opredelimo splošne zakonitosti Keesove poezije, medtem ko v drugem delu analiziramo štiri pesmi in njihovega protagonista Robinsona, ki predstavljajo jedro Keesove eksistencialne estetike. Kljub dejstvu, da se brezup v Keesovi poeziji vzpostavlja kot vseprisotna prezenca, se le-ta ne manifestira kot inhibirajoča sila. Nasprotno, ne glede na to, da je brezup neločljivo zvezan s pesnikovo tragično usodo, se v njem razgrinja silno ustvarjalni vzgib, ki je Keesu omogočil ubesediti lasten odnos do sveta in posledično njegovo lastno umestitev v njem.

**Ključne besede:** Weldon Kees, poezija, Robinson, Hart Crane, brezup, odtujenost