

‘These speculations sour in the sun’: Self-Reflection, Aging, and Death in Weldon Kees’s ‘For my Daughter’

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Abstract

This article provides the first thorough analysis of Weldon Kees’s canonical sonnet ‘For my Daughter’ (1940). It does so by way of close-reading and placing the poem within several long-standing poetic traditions as well as the author’s oeuvre as a whole. Said traditions include, most prominently, that of mirror literature, which regularly problematizes selfhood, the aging process, and death, but also modernist poetry and the sonnet, both Shakespearean and Romantic. My central interpretative claim is that the speaker’s bewildering inspection of a non-existent daughter in the sonnet results from, and can make sense as, his gloomy projection of her imagined features onto his own mirror image early in the morning.

Keywords: poetry; mirror; modernism; sonnet; age; twentieth-century literature

For my Daughter
by Weldon Kees

Looking into my daughter’s eyes I read,
Beneath the innocence of morning flesh
Concealed, hintings of death she does not heed.
Coldest of winds have blown this hair and mesh
Of seaweed snarled these miniatures of hands;
The night’s slow poison, tolerant and bland
Has moved her blood. Parched years that I have seen
That may be hers appear: foul, lingering
Death in certain war, the slim legs green.
Or, fed on hate, she relishes the sting
Of others’ agony; perhaps the cruel
Wife of a syphilitic or a fool.
These speculations sour in the sun.
I have no daughter. I desire none. (1940)

Thanks to Donald Justice’s twice-re-issued edition of his collected works, the poetry of Weldon Kees has long been available to the interested reader (Kees 1962). It has gained some high-brow media recognition—e.g. from Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker* (2005)—and,

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according to fellow poet and long-time National Endowment of the Arts chairman Dana Gioia, enjoys considerable popularity among practitioners of the art (2004: 139). Notwithstanding these accolades, however, and even at its most grimly fascinating, Kees's poetry remains widely neglected by academics. Perhaps the most striking case in point is his 1940 poem 'For my Daughter'. Although widely praised by reviewers and included in canonizing anthologies such as Phillis Levin's *Penguin Book of the Sonnet* (2001: 144), John Fuller's *Oxford Book of Sonnets* (2000: 297), and David Lehman's *Oxford Book of American Poetry* (2006: 614), it has received little literary analysis that goes beyond acknowledging its shock value and haunting memorability, especially in view of the author's disappearance and probable suicide in 1955. Whatever the reasons for this neglect, the following commentary is intended to counter them by offering a reading that, while in many ways compatible with the response of most critics, addresses more thoroughly the details of Kees's text and the various interpretative questions to which they give rise. Briefly put, and in addition to its more obvious literary-historical allegiances, I propose to read 'For my Daughter' as a mirror poem in the vein of, for instance, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's 'The Other Side of a Mirror' (1896).

Initially, of course, i.e. during our first reading of the poem, Kees's seemingly innocuous title and first lines suggest something rather different. They lead us to expect the sort of uplifting parental reflections that already figure in Ben Jonson's epigrams on his late son and daughter (1616) or Anne Bradstreet's elegies about her grandchildren (1678), but only really come to prominence in W. B. Yeats's much more recent and forward-looking 'A Prayer for my Daughter' (1921). The 'hintings of death' Kees's speaker discovers in the face of his child seem to indicate an approach quite similar to that of Yeats, who, according to Eavan Boland (2005), opens up the 'new and permitted subject matter' of daughters with the memorable image of a father 'trying to put words between his child and danger'. In the subsequent lines of Kees's poem, however, any such expectations are thoroughly shattered. As Glyn Maxwell (2004) puts it, the speaker's reflections prove 'two times shocking: once because of the unflinchingly bleak X-ray of his own child's possible future, twice because there is no child'.

Of the two shocks Maxwell identifies, the second is the more surprising. The bleak vision that causes the first, after all, is not untypical

of either modernist or war poetry. To some extent, its pessimism resembles the 'great gloom' already invoked in Yeats's 'Prayer' (1996a), whose later references to the 'murderous innocence of the sea' and troublesome 'fool' the young girl might end up marrying are even directly echoed to in 'For my Daughter' (ll. 4-5 and 12). Whereas this particular work of Yeats's may not match the hopelessness of Kees's outlook, others, such as his celebrated 'The Second Coming' (1920) with its 'blood-dimmed tide' and monstrous redeemer at least arguably do (1996b). T. S. Eliot's poetry could also be mentioned in this context, although Eliot's own treatment of fatherhood, 'Marina' (1930), counters the refrain-like invocations of death it contains with ultimately triumphant images of 'life', 'hope', 'new ships', and 'woodthrush calling through the fog' (1936). Robert Graves's more directly war-related 'The Cool Web' (1927), by contrast, remains starkly pessimistic throughout. Despite its somewhat different thematic focus, it contains several obvious motivic similarities to Kees's poem, e.g. when the speaker describes 'us' as ensnared, spelling away 'the soldiers and the fright', and averting our eyes from 'the wide glare of the children's day' before 'We grow sea-green at last and coldly die / In brininess and volubility' (1986). Graves's dark vision here recalls Kees's underwater imagery in lines four, five, and possibly nine. It is followed by a final stanza which, comparably to the cruelty, syphilis, and marital misery Kees's speaker foresees for his child, presents madness as the only alternative to death. Like many other classics of modernist inter-war writing, 'The Cool Web' at least partially prefigures the unflinching bleakness of 'For my Daughter'.

The second shock Maxwell identifies, which is the one most critics describe as central to Kees's poem, has no such precedents in the lyric tradition. By revealing in the last line that 'I have no daughter', Kees's speaker does more than merely inform us of an additional, unexpected fact. As Dan Schneider (2003) has pointed out, he forces us radically to revise what may be called the objective, or perhaps one should say situational, correlative of the poem. Suddenly, and contrary to what we have been led to assume up to this point, we can no longer think of the speaker's souring 'speculations' as arising from the real-world experience of a father looking at his child. This naturally raises the question of what else we are to make of them. Our first response will probably be to re-interpret the presented vision in the way most critics

seem to have done, i.e. as a more free-floating reflection on the question of procreation. Since this retrospective adjustment remains for the most part implicit in the existing brief assessments of the poem, it is worth spelling out in detail: from a gloomy, dream-like and entirely fictional fantasy of fatherhood that includes the first lines and even extends to the title of the poem, Kees's speaker finally emerges into the sobering light ('sun') of factual reality, where he reminds himself of his true condition ('I have no daughter') and asserts, or perhaps concludes on the basis of his fantasy, that he prefers this condition to its alternative ('I desire none'). While any re-reading along these or similar lines can account for much in 'For my Daughter', several unanswered questions remain.

It should be noted that the questions I am referring to arise only after the non-existence of the daughter has been revealed. They might differ from reader to reader, of course, but for many, I would argue, they are likely to run along the following lines: why is the speaker's imagined apparition framed in such a complex manner? If his daughter is imaginary anyway, why does he explicitly distinguish her physical appearance from his reading of this appearance? This question is not answered in the text, and closely related to a second problem that is not addressed by the above reading: how can we account for the temporal specificity of not only the speaker's vision, but also the daughter's apparition herself? That the daughter is marked by a particular time of day is evident from her 'morning flesh', the 'night's slow poison' that 'has moved her blood', and a few other, less obvious hints to which I will return below. Why, we might be prompted to ask, would an entirely imaginary and hence in principle extra-temporal image of one's daughter be related so emphatically to the time of dawn? Again, the poem provides no immediate clues. Thirdly, there are the deictic implications of the demonstrative articles in lines four and five. Unlike, say, the equally metrically viable 'her', Kees's 'this' and 'these' emphasise the physical presence and empirical accessibility of the daughter's hair and hands to an extent that seems unnecessary and even excessive for products of pure speculation.

If we accept the standard interpretation of the poem, we may at least initially have been tempted to explain these phenomena in terms of what Roland Barthes has called the 'reality effect': like the structurally 'useless detail' (168) in the novels of Flaubert and other realist authors, they might be 'irreducible residues of functional analysis' (172) and

serve to denote the 'concrete reality' (ibid.) of the external world, thereby reassuring us beyond doubt that the speaker's initial encounter with his daughter is actually taking place.¹ In other words, they might serve no purpose other than to deceive us into believing what is denied in the poem's last line. This, however, constitutes a serious breach of the communicational contract between writer and reader—not just on the level of aesthetics, which we might still regard as predictably subject to revision in a modernist work, but also on the more basic level of informational relevance. Instead of revealing unexpected but textually viable alternatives to our initial reading, the poem appears to lead us to an interpretative dead end. Again, this aspect of it has been neither explicitly pinpointed by critics nor discussed in any depth, though its disruptive nature is at least occasionally reflected in their comments. Raymond Nelson (1989), for instance, points out Kees's 'refusal to compromise with the reader, who must insist on a different vision, a different resolution' (826); Nicholas Spencer (2000) speaks of Kees's 'transgression of referential as well as familial or humanistic suppositions' (107); and the already mentioned Maxwell concludes his generally laudatory account of the poem on a note of baffled questioning: 'What is to be coped with here? That language can do anything, can speak beautifully from the depths of the soul and turn out to be fibbing?'

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Are the above-mentioned 'realist' phenomena utterly irreconcilable with the revelation of the last line or is there another way of re-interpreting 'For my Daughter' that can accommodate the two? Perhaps there is. Instead of regarding as imaginary and part of the speaker's 'speculations' the situational setting that underlies the first twelve lines, we can also opt for an unusual (but not, under the circumstances, implausible) reading of its textual foundation. More precisely, we can re-interpret the phrase 'Looking into my daughter's eyes' as cleverly exploiting an old and familiar compliment to the fathers of newborn daughters, whose more gender-marked features—nose, chin, legs, skin, etc.—bystanders usually

¹ The phrases in quotation marks are my translations of 'détails inutiles', 'résidus irréductibles de l'analyse fonctionnelle', and 'le réel concret' from the respective pages of Barthes (1984).

feel reluctant to associate with a baby girl: ‘Look! She has her father’s eyes!’ Following the logic of this and similar commonplace identifications—a logic based on the economico-biological metaphor of inherited traits—Kees’s speaker may actually be referring to his own eyes as those of his potential daughter. Instead of a man projecting the bleak experiences of his own ‘parched years’ onto his imaginary child, we may well be dealing with one who reads in his own eyes (and later face, hair, hands, legs, and possibly facial expressions and wrinkles) the future of the child he might have had.

Of course, such a reading presupposes the physical presence of a mirror, whose reflection of himself Kees’s speaker can plausibly be ‘looking’ at from line one onwards, and which can fulfil, throughout the poem, the function it usually fulfils in the tradition of mirror literature. By ‘mirror literature’ I mean the various literary invocations of the specular motif that begin with the myth of Narcissus as described in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and include—much closer in time and more revealingly with respect to ‘For my Daughter’—Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s ‘The Other Side of a Mirror’ (1896).² Before considering this literary tradition in detail, however, and situating Kees’s text within it, we will need not only to determine how exactly the presence of a mirror affects our reading of ‘For my Daughter’, but also, first of all, establish it. This in turn brings us to the central difficulty of my proposed interpretation: whereas in Coleridge’s poem the mirror in question is already introduced in the title, and the speaker states quite explicitly that she ‘sat before a glass one day / And conjured up a vision bare’ (2000), no mirror is actually mentioned by Kees. Now, it may well be true that a direct reference to one could hardly be expected since it would spoil the surprise ending of our first reading. The striking effect of the couplet, after all, depends entirely on our belief that Kees’s speaker is facing another human being. It may further be true that the mirror’s posited presence yields additional meaning and prevents an interpretative impasse. Yet there is little doubt that most readers would require at least slightly more positive and suggestive hints in order actively to supply

². For a study that traces the tradition of mirror literature through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, yet focusses mostly on the contributions of female authors, see La Belle 1988.

such a definite physical object. Where, then, in 'For my Daughter', do we find these hints?

One of them is intertextual in nature and relies heavily on our literary-historical background knowledge. It consists of Kees's bringing together of a certain theme with a certain poetic form, namely imagined parenthood with the sonnet. For readers who know their Shakespeare, this combination alone may already prove suggestive enough to recall a very particular scenario. 'Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest / Now is the time that face should form another' runs one of the Bard's first injunctions to the 'only begetter' of his sonnet cycle (2007: 2435). It forms the opening statement of sonnet 3, which famously encourages Mr W. H. to procreate. Even if we dismiss as coincidental the verbal and semantic correspondences with Kees's first line—i.e. those between 'Look in' and 'Looking', 'viewest' and 'read'—the subsequent metaphorical equation of the young man with his mother's looking-glass constitutes at least a potentially scene-setting precedent for the inversely gendered parent-child encounter in 'For my Daughter':

Thou art thy mother's glass and she in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime;
So thou through windows of thine age shalt see,
Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time.

Rather than any 'lovely' or 'golden' 'prime', of course, Kees's aging speaker 'calls back' a distinctly modernist April, whose superlative cruelty renders ultimately undesirable its physical reproduction in the shape of a daughter. This contrast can only emerge, however, before a background of notable similarity: in both sonnets, the protagonist identifies in emphatically visual terms the future of his potential offspring with his own past. Combined with several other, less specifically literary hints, this thematically central resemblance between Shakespeare's childless addressee and Kees's equally childless speaker invites us actively to draw further parallels between them, and hence to imagine also the latter as at least potentially facing a mirror.

Among the less literary hints in question, perhaps the most suggestive one is Kees's use of 'morning flesh'. The phrase stands out already during our first reading of his poem, partly because it is a modern colloquialism still rather rare in written English, and partly because, when attributed to the speaker's child, it seems slightly out of place.

After all, the daughter's heedlessness and 'miniatures of hands'—let alone the generic convention re-established by Yeats—clearly mark her out as a young child. 'Morning flesh', by contrast, denotes a sleep-induced, sensitivity-heightening, and temporarily skin-smoothing puffiness of especially the face that is usually associated with adulthood and the beginnings of physical decline.³ Judging by innumerable popular representations of 'fresh-faced youth' and not least cell-biological reality, the flesh of the very young does not change significantly enough overnight to be given a different name in the morning. Unlike the matutinal smoothness of the adult face, the child's apparent innocence, i.e. freedom from the traces of lived experience, does not visibly diminish in the course of the day. Before this background, it appears quite remarkable that Kees's speaker attributes 'the innocence of morning flesh' to someone supposedly very young. During our first reading, in order to avoid the resulting incongruence, we may perhaps understand the phrase metaphorically, as referring to the daughter's round-cheeked purity in the 'morning' of her life. Yet even this does not entirely obliterate the more literal meaning of 'morning flesh' and its implicit identification of the young girl's face with that of a less-than-innocent grown-up—an identification that further corroborates, albeit still indirectly, my mirror hypothesis.

More importantly, though, and perhaps more obviously to anyone who has ever used the phrase, there is also a rather straightforward connection between 'morning flesh' and mirrors. After all, the situation we most strongly associate with the phenomenon in question is an age-old ritual involving a stable set of props: we typically encounter it when washing, or perhaps shaving, in the morning. This, in turn, almost invariably takes place in front of a mirror—a connection that is further strengthened by the appearance of the 'parched years' in line seven. The word 'parched' is used metaphorically, of course, in order to characterise at least some of the speaker's past as sterile and lifeless. At the same time, though, its strong physiognomical connotations encourage us to read it more literally as an attribute of the face he observes. The

³ The phrase seems to be still too rare for its own entry in reference works such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but its few archived internet appearances all confirm my linguistic intuitions. It is possible, of course, that Kees was the first to use it, but this seems unlikely given his emphasis on 'innocence' and the absence of any contextual explanation of the phrase.

colourless dryness denoted by the phrase constitutes a familiar facial symptom of aging that again, like morning-flesh, is typically observed during our matutinal self-inspection in the mirror. Combined with his early-morning setting, then, both of Kees's allusions to facial phenomena point us to the standard occasion on which they might be encountered and, with it, to its principal material prop. Furthermore, there is the fact that the speaker's speculations 'sour in the sun', and thus put us in mind of a milkman's delivery coagulating on his doorstep. By alluding to a second everyday morning routine widely familiar in 1940s America (i.e. the milkman coming by), Kees reinforces his invocation of the first (i.e. washing). In addition, his inclusion of yet another morning-related metaphor in the couplet subtly highlights the situational continuity between the speaker's speculative 'looking' in the main part of the poem and his dismissal of the resulting vision at the end. By way of illustrative analogy, it might be worth quoting the last stanza of Philip Larkin's 'Send No Money' (1962; 2003b). In this later poem—just like in 'For my Daughter', I would argue—the association between facial features and 'dark mornings' is sufficient for the reader to supply a mirror to which the poem does not refer explicitly:

Half life is over now,
And I meet full face on dark mornings
The bestial visor, bent in
By the blows of what happened to happen.

Last, and perhaps least, there is Kees's choice of the word 'speculations' in his final couplet. As readers sensitive to etymology might notice and John Ashbury would point out decades later in 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' (1974), the word 'comes from the Latin *speculum*, mirror' (l. 50).

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On their own, the above hints may still not seem conclusive. Taken in conjunction, however, against the alternative of an interpretative impasse, and in the context of the poem's deliberately deceptive initial scene-setting, they should suffice for us at least tentatively to envisage Kees's speaker as facing his own reflection. Much like Thomas Hardy's

speaker in 'I look into my glass' (1898), Kees's can be seen as pondering his own 'wasting skin' in the mirror, albeit under different circumstances and with quite different results than his predecessor. 'For my Daughter', as I would argue here, expresses the train of thought of a man who imagines, just before sunrise in a bedroom or bathroom mirror, his own puffed-up face and general appearance to be that of the daughter he could have had and might still have in the future. This daughter he sees as bound to inherit not only his eyes and superficially tender facial features of the moment, but also, as part of the human condition perhaps, the unheeded 'hintings of death' about to come to light in his own face: the inevitable prospect of aging, in other words, that is usually ignored by the young but has already left its mark on him. Of course, the speaker's vision of his daughter is still largely imaginary in this reading. Yet it is also determined by, or rather takes its cues from, his own reflection in the glass. Instead of fantasizing in the abstract, he imaginatively transforms, in the dim twilight that precedes daybreak, the physical signs of his own age and experience into alien and elemental forces besetting the body of his potential child. Thus, the grizzled strands he can vaguely make out in the reflection of his own dishevelled hair appear to him as traces of frost left on her by the 'coldest of winds', and the blue-green veins traversing his hands—hands which, for their part, look unusually distant and diminutive in the mirror—as 'mesh of seaweed' ominously entangling hers.

The 'night's slow poison' in the next sentence of 'For my Daughter' constitutes perhaps the most intrinsically obscure metaphor of the poem. During our first reading, while we are still assuming that there is an actual daughter, we may well attempt to read this blood-moving entity as whatever might have quickened the girl's pulse, thereby woken her, and then presumably made her call for, or seek out, her father. Sleep itself might perhaps qualify, especially if one associates it with the hardly perceptible process of aging—an uncommon link that would draw attention to the speaker's bleak outlook already at this early stage. Yet there are other candidates as well. Nightmares, for instance, suggest themselves insofar as they usually agitate and, over time, adversely affect the sleeper. They would be difficult to reconcile with tolerance and blandness, however. Whereas calling dreams 'tolerant' might possibly still be justified with recourse to Freud, who sees them as giving at least

a slightly freer rein to the drives of the Id than waking life does,⁴ the term 'bland' runs directly counter to their presumed power to startle the sleeper. The two attributes are also decidedly at odds with a child's slowly mounting fear of the dark, and thus rule out yet another plausible tenor of the metaphor. This might in turn prompt us to cast our interpretative net more widely and read 'the night's slow poison' as representing a less immediate nocturnal influence on the young daughter, namely that of the sexual relations between her parents. A couple's sexual activities, after all, tend to take place at night and may well become toxic over time in psychological and even physical terms (cf. the 'syphilitic' mentioned in line twelve). They may have 'moved' the daughter's 'blood' in the sense of given her life, may be described as 'tolerant', for instance with regard to the parents' marital unsuitability or mutual alienation, and can also make for 'bland' experiences, for instance, again, if the parties involved are unsuitable or alienated from or indifferent to each other. Next to the age-related one, the sexual reading of the metaphor thus provides at least one possible second interpretation of lines whose haunting obscurity might well yield more.

Whatever interpretation we initially give to 'the night's slow poison', how does our interpretation of it change after we learn that the speaker's daughter is not real in any objective or material sense of the word? In view of, presumably, the morbid imagery that pervades 'For my Daughter', Jason Guriel (2009) likens the girl to a horror-movie heroine who surprisingly turns out to be a ghost. He thereby implicitly identifies as tenor of the metaphor the slowly passing and traditionally horror-prone time of night. After the revelation of the final couplet, this interpretation is quite suggestive and, if developed, might also go some way towards rooting the speaker's fantasy in a specific experience. At the same time, however, it seems strikingly incompatible with Kees's references to the child's morning-flesh and moving blood. In the face of such marked physicality, assuming the presence of a mirror makes for a far less problematic reading. Taking the poem's central apparition to be

⁴ According to Freud's seminal study of 1900, dreams are 'a *form* of *expressing* impulses [...] that were, during daytime, loaded down by resistance and, in the night, managed to draw additional strength from deep sources of excitation' (my translation of: 'eine *Form* des *Ausdrucks* für Regungen [...], auf denen bei Tage ein Widerstand lastete und die sich bei Nacht Verstärkung aus tiefliegenden Erregungsquellen holen konnten'; 1991: 600).

specular rather than spectral, we can easily explain both her ethereal appearance and her organic substance, namely by relating the former to the image the speaker sees in the mirror and the latter to this image's ultimate source and physical *substratum*: his own body. The 'night's slow poison' can thus stand for the slowly passing hours of the night, whose bland uneventfulness does not only lead the speaker to indulge more tolerantly than usual in dreams or half-dreams of procreation, but also positively animates, in his waking thoughts and by way of his imaginative faculties, the spirit-like mirror vision of a potential child that is literally made up of his own flesh and blood.

The immediately following and in many ways most complex sentence of Kees's poem (ll. 7-12) makes explicit the speaker's thorough-going identification with his daughter. Its key metaphor, 'parched years', is presented as simultaneously his own past experience ('that I have seen') and her potential future ('that may be hers'). In fact, it is this coincidence that during our initial reading of 'For my Daughter' first renders suspicious the speaker's fatherly gaze and makes us wonder to what extent it may be informed by autobiographical projection. By foregrounding far more strongly than any of Kees's earlier metaphors the extreme subjectivity of the speaker's observations, this part of the sonnet can even be seen as anticipating the revelation of the final line. For all we know during our first reading, the speaker is still looking at an actual person when he suddenly and conspicuously leaves behind the domain of the visually observable, presenting us instead with her 'foul, lingering / Death in certain war' and two equally disheartening alternatives to it. The details of these hypothetical scenarios and their shockingly radical pessimism compel us already at this stage of the reading process to shift our attention from the child and her potential future to the person who gazes at her with such a desperate sense of foreboding—a shift whose appropriateness is then amply confirmed by the final couplet.

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With 'I have no daughter. I desire none', Kees's last line retroactively erases the so far central figure of the poem and thus forces us to re-interpret everything we have read—including, and starting with, the title. If the poem can still count as a speech act lovingly committed 'For my Daughter', then it would do so only insofar as confirming someone's

non-existence can be seen as in their interest. By most standards, rejecting the option of even having a daughter would be seen as speaking against her. In addition, more importantly, Kees's final erasure of the daughter re-directs all our subsequent readings to the attitude and condition of the speaking subject. At the end of our first reading, in other words, it collapses the initial differentiation between observer and observed, leaving only one person for us to engage with and turning the entire text into an instance of his self-reflection. This emphasis on personal self-reflection as well as, more specifically, Kees's collapsing of two apparently separate identities into one brings us back to the tradition of mirror literature and recalls several of its most prominent exponents from the *fin de siècle*. The last lines of 'The Other Side of a Mirror', for example, in which Mary Coleridge's speaker commands her specular vision to disappear, are structurally similar to Kees's:

Pass—as the fairer visions pass—
Nor ever more return, to be
The ghost of a distracted hour,
That heard me whisper, "I am she!"

With the whisper referred to and perhaps also enacted in the very last line, the vision that dominates most of Coleridge's poem is openly identified with the person of the speaker. Just as in Kees's poem, it is turned from a ghostly apparition into a symptom of the speaker's state of mind or being, which is thereby revealed as the central concern of the text. If the final twist in 'The Other Side of a Mirror' seems less radical than that in 'For my Daughter', this is because by placing her speaker explicitly in front of a mirror, Coleridge suggests from the beginning that what she sees and describes throughout most of the poem may well turn out to be herself. At least in theory, though, there are other possibilities. After all, the mirror may have magical properties—as for instance in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' or the Grimm brothers' 'Snow White'. And even if we consider such alternatives highly unlikely—say because ballads and fairy tales usually have an authorial narrator, which Coleridge's poem obviously lacks—the very fact that the vision in the mirror is described in the third person at least temporarily and in the speaker's own eyes establishes it as alien to her.

In both Mary Coleridge's and Kees's poem, the speaker's self-alienation evokes a strong sense of the uncanny. It calls into existence a

chimerical alter ego that temporarily embodies otherwise repressed aspects of the speaker's being. Yet whereas the Bertha-Mason-like madwoman from 'The Other Side of a Mirror' constitutes a literary phenomenon already familiar to late nineteenth-century readers and by now thoroughly explored by scholars,⁵ the image of the doomed daughter as *doppelgänger* of her world-weary father was, and still is, extremely rare. This is probably because of its unorthodox implications. By identifying the future of any potential daughter with his own undesirable past, Kees's speaker depletes this future of hope and thus rejects an almost universally accepted association with childhood. As a consequence, and in view of mankind's rarely disputed ignorance of the future, his refusal or inability to conceive of anything but disaster for his child might strike many readers as irrational, if not pathological. As the 'may' in line eight indicates, however, he is aware that his own 'parched years' do not necessarily have to become hers. This in turn leaves us with the even darker and more intriguing conclusion that the experiences in question, of which we catch only a few chilling glimpses in the poem, proved so unspeakably painful and traumatic for the speaker that the mere possibility of their spoiling also his daughter's life renders him incapable of imagining her happiness and suffices to keep him from engendering her.

Although the speaker's past thus shows aspects of the traumatic, we are not dealing with a case of early childhood trauma as theorised, for example, by Freud. Apart from, perhaps, her being 'fed on hate', what little we learn about the dangers besetting the young girl is predominantly adult-related. Moreover, when projecting his daughter's imagined features onto his own dimly-lit mirror image, Kees's speaker explicitly recalls a face that is both innocent and heedless, and thereby adopts a traditionally romantic view of childhood 'before the fall'. If the thoughts of his and his daughter's early youth do not, as in the case of, say, Wordsworth's *Intimations* ode, 'breed, / Perpetual benediction' (1996a: 731), this is only, it seems, because they are retrospectively tainted by the 'hintings of death' the speaker cannot help reading into them. The kind of vision that Wordsworth's own much-acclaimed sonnet

⁵ The type in question is particularly prominent in neo-Gothic sensation fiction, whose conventions are also conspicuously at work in the central mirror-gazing scene of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The most influential academic discussion of it is still Gilbert and Gubar (1979).

on an infant daughter invokes as a 'heavenly face' (1996b: 737) is irreparably defiled, in the eyes of Kees's speaker, by his young girl's potential to turn into an adult like himself, marked by the same grim life experiences. In a highly original reversal of Wordsworth's famous *dictum*—'the child is father of the man' (1996a: 728)—the suffering and disillusioned man in Kees's poem proves to be too much father of the child to be able to treat the latter as a source of romantic nostalgia and consolation.

Kees's markedly anti-romantic stance also manifests itself in his nature imagery and invocation of the drowning-girl motif in lines four and five. While there are hints of the natural sublime (cf. 'coldest of winds', 'miniatures'), the sea he presents us with appears far too pernicious to convey the sort of otherworldly peacefulness or Keatsian death wish still manifest in, for instance, Millais's painting *Ophelia* (1852) or Prufrock's mermaids (1915). In 'For my Daughter', nature does not welcome the dead girl to her motherly bosom or consolingly roll her round as it does Wordsworth's Lucy. Instead it causes her cold, vulnerable limbs to turn green with rot. Kees's emphasis on physical decay here, and, in close connection with it, the process of aging in the sense of acquiring life experience does more than merely designate 'For my Daughter' as a modernist poem. It also constitutes a second thematic link to the tradition of mirror poetry.

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The theme of aging and physical decay in Kees's poem first becomes manifest in connection with 'morning flesh' and the speaker's imaginatively rejuvenated features (cf. my earlier reading of 'coldest of winds', 'sea weed', etc.). Furthermore, it is closely, if still somewhat obscurely, related to his life-denying attitude (cf. his 'parched years'). That it is also almost as integral to the tradition of mirror literature as the act of self-reflection and the looking-glass motif itself can already be gleaned from Ovid's account of Narcissus, who pines away, consumed by the love of his own reflection, 'as the yellow wax melts before a gentle heat, as hoar frost melts before the warm morning sun' (1916: 159; ll. 486-490). In many examples of mirror literature—including, as we will see, 'For my Daughter'—the sun plays the important role of illuminating the mirror gazer's physical decay over time. In Ovid's text,

it even directly brings this process about. The youth's decaying body vaguely anticipates Kees's 'slim legs green', and the withering of Narcissus's beauty at least metaphorically recalls the aging process. The latter is also addressed in Shakespeare's sonnet no. 3 as well as—and contrary, perhaps, to our first impression—in Mary Coleridge's poem. While it is true that 'The Other Side of a Mirror' primarily focusses on the ferociousness of the speaker's repressed emotions, the very emergence of her looking-glass apparition is presented as at least in part a consequence of her increasing life experience: the speaker's 'vision bare' is animated by 'the dying flame of life's desire'; it reveals 'what once no man on earth could guess' and is contrasted, in yet another temporally suggestive phrase, with 'aspects glad and gay / That erst were found reflected there'. One might object that Coleridge's 'erst' and perhaps even 'once' could refer to the very recent past. In this case, the vision of the speaker would constitute her immediate reaction to a particular, though unspecified, incident rather than her gradually accumulating experience, and the 'flame of life's desire' would be 'dying' for lack of hope rather than youthful vigour. Yet even if we accept such a reading, the emotional and physiognomic impact of a single life-changing event on Coleridge's speaker can still be regarded as an instance of aging, albeit perhaps an unusually dramatic one.

In any case, Mary Coleridge's poem provides only one among many modern instances of how the disfiguring experience of aging is represented in the tradition of mirror literature. The hero of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), for example, probably the best-known male counterpart to the mirrored madwoman in late nineteenth-century fiction, is positively obsessed with the ravages of age. Dorian Gray regularly contemplates his physical and moral dissolution by contrasting, on the one hand, the boyish appearance of the mirrored face before him with, on the other hand, the aging and less innocent self that is masked by it:

[He would] stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled

around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. (2003: 124)

Rather than comparing them side by side, of course, Kees's middle-aged speaker sees his two personas in sequence: first his younger, then only his adult self. Unlike that between the mirrored and painted Dorian, moreover, the distinction between child and father is not entirely stable even before its final breakdown. Assisted by darkness, the rejuvenating puffiness of his morning-flesh, and his free-wheeling imagination, Kees's speaker may have largely succeeded in transforming his own dim reflection into the face of a potential young daughter, but the irrepressible 'hintings of death' and 'parched years' that characterise his adult countenance still make their presence felt. They constitute tell-tale signs of age, as we have seen, and also, as we are invited to suspect even without the suggestive foil of Wilde's novel, sinfulness.

In 'For my Daughter', the question of the speaker's morality is first touched upon and linked with aging when he describes the 'innocence of morning flesh' that is reflected before him. Significantly, though, 'innocence' and, by implication, 'lack of innocence' are highly ambiguous terms. Instead of a state of moral or even criminal guilt, the latter could as well designate one of mere disillusionment and thus remain morally neutral. The phrase 'hintings of death' may not be definite enough to clinch the issue, but the images that follow it certainly encourage such a view. Even if one did not read them as referring to physical signs of aging, as I have done earlier, they would still strongly suggest helpless passivity rather than morally significant human agency: it is, after all, the 'winds' that blow and the 'seaweed' that snarls, not the daughter or speaker. Later on in the poem, the speaker's portrayal of his filial *alter ego* as a vulnerable and helpless victim is fleshed out and rendered more concrete by his description of her possible death in war: 'the slim legs green'. Immediately afterwards, however, our initial suspicion regarding his adult life is not only raised once again, but also strikingly confirmed.

Judging by the speaker's view of his daughter's possible future, his own experiences (the 'parched years that I have seen') comprise at least as much moral as physical corruption. Alternatively to the girl's 'death in certain war', he envisages her as 'the cruel / Bride of a syphilitic or a fool'. One might object, perhaps, that this marital scenario does not necessarily allude to the speaker's own life. When he claims to 'have

seen' certain things, he could be referring merely to his observation of other people's sufferings. This is, after all, the only way we can make sense of his earlier inclusion of death in his 'parched years', for if he had died himself, he could hardly be speculating about his daughter. Notwithstanding this possibility, however, the poem strongly suggests a first-hand experience of marital misery. From among a vast range of possibilities that include many more familiar and widely observable marriage problems, the speaker seizes on the very specific case of a sadism that results from long-term, possibly marital conditioning (cf. 'fed on hate') and whose intensely private and emotional nature reveals intimate personal knowledge. We would hardly expect a mere onlooker to render the experience in question as precisely and evocatively as Kees's speaker does when he describes how his grown-up daughter 'relishes the sting / Of others' agony'.

Although the speaker's dire account of his potential daughter's future thus appears rooted in his own marital past and possibly present (note the present perfect of 'have seen'), there is still the question of whether and how he has actively contributed to his misery. Is he the perpetrator or victim of the cruelty he experienced? In my view, Kees maintains a carefully balanced ambiguity here that has itself interpretative significance. On the one hand, the speaker may be disregarding the gender difference between himself and his daughter and thus derive his image of her cruel bridehood from his own similar experience as the cruel bridegroom, and later husband, of a foolish or diseased woman. In this case the 'parched years' that 'appear' in his mirror image would comprise the sort of physiognomic traces that are traditionally associated with cruelty and also happen to be highlighted in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'The quivering ardent sunlight showed [Dorian] the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing' (88). On the other hand, and no less plausibly, Kees's speaker might identify his daughter with her mother on this occasion, and envisage her as married to a fool or syphilitic such as himself, a man who would in turn suffer from her cruelty. This view is supported by earlier literary invocations of syphilis—such as, for instance, in Siegfried Sassoon's war poem 'They' (1917)—where the disease had become emblematic of sexually transmitted illnesses among soldiers and hence more strongly associated with men than with women (1996: 1208). It would be difficult to choose

between these two readings and, in fact, Kees's poem does not encourage us to. Since syphilis and most kinds of foolishness form, or at least used to form, barely less of a moral stigma than cruelty conditioned by long-term exposure to 'hate', the overall impression of the passage is one of universal and inescapable corruption. In the world view of Kees's speaker, the question of moral responsibility turns out to be moot because no grown-up can be regarded as innocent.

On the basis, then, of especially the last section of 'For my Daughter', we can conclude that Kees conflates even more thoroughly than Wilde or the Romantics the conceptually distinct processes of physical aging and moral degeneration. Dorian Gray may be unable to tell apart their effects on his portrait but at least he can still distinguish between them. Kees's speaker, by contrast, seems to regard practically all life beyond childhood as intrinsically corrupt in both the physical and moral sense. Looked at in this light, 'For my Daughter' can be understood as a radical example of the literary ageism that, while perhaps not typical of mirror literature in general, still forms a notable feature of especially its modernist manifestations.⁶ An earlier case in point, for instance, would be Yeats's mytho-poetic love poem 'The Two Trees' of 1893 (1996c). Although at first sight this poem seems to set up a contrast between surface and depth, between the addressee's aging reflection in 'the bitter glass' on the one hand (ll. 21-40) and the divine, timeless, and tenderness-inducing memories of her 'own heart' on the other (ll. 1-20), the mirror's 'fatal image' reflects not only her 'outer weariness' but also a number of moral flaws and weaknesses. These include an all-encompassing 'barrenness', 'the ravens of unresting thought', their 'Cruel claw and hungry throat', and the 'unkind' eyes that the experience of aging makes the addressee cast on the world. Kees's premonitions of his daughter's adulthood are at least similarly damning.

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⁶ This is in line with the history of Modernism more generally. Already in 1903, George Bernard Shaw wrote that 'every man over forty is a scoundrel,' and, as Chris Baldick (2004) notes and illustrates at length, 'modern literary culture amplified the grievances of the young against the old, especially in the aftermath of the Great War' (349).

As the only alternative to an adulthood marked by cruelty, Kees's speaker imagines his daughter's 'death in certain war' whose apparent 'hintings' he already registers early on in the poem (l. 3). These thoughts are later dismissed as hypothetical speculations, but the theme of death still remains present during our second reading, only this time in relation to the speaker himself. Although not explicitly invoked, intimations of his own mortality pervade the entire poem, and it is no accident that critics regularly, albeit vaguely, come to associate 'For my Daughter' with its author's presumed suicide. For most adult readers, after all, the question of parenthood is and has long been closely bound up with the transience of life and the extinction of the individual. Already in Shakespeare's sonnets, procreation is presented first and foremost as a means of warding off death and ensuring the parent's afterlife, with the child functioning mainly as an extension of the parental self. Needless to say perhaps, this view is limited neither to literature nor early modern culture. Linguistically codified for instance in the prefix of the word 'reproduction', it has remained a widely shared cultural commonplace across the globe despite centuries of historical change in man's conceptions of both childhood and personal identity. By invoking this commonplace, Kees is able to thematise death and mortality without having to mention them directly. His poem raises the issue of procreation in close conjunction with those of aging and the self, and thus presents itself to us as a response to a familiar question traditionally asked of the childless: why, in the face of ever-advancing age and approaching extinction, did or do they not feel the need to reproduce and thereby perpetuate their existence?

Kees's answer is clear. His speaker differs from, say, Philip Larkin's skeptical bachelors from a few decades later in that he fully accepts the afterlife-affirming identification of parent and child (cf. Larkin 2003a and 2003c). Rather than challenge the widely-accepted continuity between the latter, Kees's speaker pushes it to an extreme with regard to his particular case. As far as he is concerned, having a daughter is utterly undesirable precisely because she threatens to continue his own doomed and corrupt existence. This is why the day that breaks for the speaker in the final couplet slightly mitigates his condition: it reminds him of his childlessness and the concomitant limit to his misery. The morning sun, in other words, is half-heartedly welcomed by the speaker as a highly unconventional *memento mori*. In addition to cutting short his specular

horror vision of a filial afterlife marked by continued suffering, it reminds him of the simultaneously disagreeable and disintegrating passage of time, of the destructive as well as distasteful process that will continue to 'parch' and 'sour', but also eventually put an end to, his remaining days. This position is evidently not far from suicidal.

Fifteen years after publishing 'For my Daughter', Kees himself most probably took the fatal step towards the surface of the Pacific. His body was never found, but his permanent disappearance and deserted car near the Golden Gate Bridge strongly suggest that he jumped. This lends a special poignancy to the autobiographical dimension of 'For my Daughter' and, in conclusion, raises the question of the sonnet's place within Kees's own oeuvre. Indeed, although Kees produced little comparable work before 1940, the subject of suicide, or at the very least of an individual's sudden disappearance from his settled existence, resurfaces more than once in his subsequent writings—and occasionally even in direct connection with looking glasses and related domestic settings. The account of an empty room in 'Robinson' (1947), for example, where 'The mirror from Mexico stuck to the wall / Reflects nothing at all' in the absence of its owner's imaginative input (1962: 59; ll. 5-6), recalls the projection-screen quality of the mirror in 'For my Daughter'. 'The Heat in the Room' (1947), furthermore, is reminiscent of both the paternal speaker's specular double vision and his fictional daughter's domestic troubles when it shows a despairing wife trying to relate to her emotionally stunted husband only to find that his face 'Was held as though he faced a looking glass / And saw another face behind his own' (1962: 79; ll. 13-14). The nocturnal-to-early-morning setting of 'For my Daughter' briefly recurs in 'Robinson at Home' (1947), whose protagonist 'wakes in sweat / To the terrible moonlight and what might be / Silence' (1962: 136; ll. 24-26), as well as, more emphatically, in 'Small Prayer' (1947). Here (1962: 144) the speaker addresses the 'fresh day' and 'old sun, so long unseen' (l. 3) in the hope that the latter's burning glare may 'cleanse' (l. 4)

Whatever it is that a wound remembers
After the healing ends. (ll. 5-6)

While the sun seems less ambiguously beneficial on this occasion than in 'For my Daughter', the image of an already healed wound as the carrier of memorized and still festering pain suggests a traumatic past quite

similar to that invoked in the earlier poem, one that ultimately makes us doubt the new day's restorative powers.

Even in the last book Kees published, a co-written study in social psychology (1956), we find several suggestive echoes of 'For my Daughter'. According to the chapter titled 'People Alone', 'facial expression [...] is in part dictated by muscular development, in part by the appearance of the skin, and in part by the bony structure of the skull' (63-64), and the chapter on 'the Material Environment as Personal Expression' includes the following two photographs of domestic mirrors taken by Kees that recall at least aspects of the looking-glass implied in his sonnet:



Figure 1: hearth mirror that reflects Kees



Figure 2: dressing table with mirror

The hearth mirror in the first image (Figure 1) contains, in its low right corner, a small and entirely unacknowledged self-portrait of the poet-painter-filmmaker that testifies to his continuing interest in specularity and optical effects, and the second (Figure 2), under the heading of ‘altarlike assemblies’, shows the sort of dressing table mid-twentieth century readers might well have associated with a husband’s private self-inspection in the bedroom (see Kees 156: 133 and 142f respectively; the details or provenance of either image are not specified in the book).

However, Kees’s most direct and prominent revisitation of the sonnet’s central themes, one that strikingly re-enacts its dramatization of early morning mirror gazing in connection with both aging and death, must be his late poem ‘January’ (1955). At first, the speaker of ‘January’ begins his ‘Morning: blue, cold, and still’ by staring out of the window rather than into a mirror, and projecting onto what he sees there ‘the sense of wrong / And emptiness and loss / That is my awakening’ (Kees 1962: 150). Yet about half-way into the poem (ibid.), when his thoughts turn to the passing of his own life, the speaking situation is revealed as almost identical to the one I propose to be the setting of ‘For my Daughter’:

50 *Rudolph Glitz*

A lifetime drains away
Down a path of frost;
My face in the looking-glass
Turns again from the light
Toward fragments of the past
That break with the end of sleep.
This wakening, this breath
No longer real, this deep
Darkness where we toss,
Cover a life at the last.
Sleep is too short a death.

In these lines, obviously, Kees makes explicit almost all of the central concerns traced above in his earlier sonnet: the specular as well as mental self-reflection of his presumably authorial speaker, the conception of the latter's mirrored face as fissured 'fragments of the past' (which correspond to 'parched years'), his deep-seated and unexplained aversion towards this past, and his consequent death wish.

The immediate starkness of vision that is gained by the later poem's explicitness may be absent from 'For my Daughter', but in my view this absence is more than made up for by at least two of the sonnet's most distinctive qualities. These are, firstly, the added evocation of romanticised childhood innocence as an intensifying backdrop to the speaker's position and, secondly, the closer hermeneutic involvement of the reader as elicited by the surprise effect in the couplet and initial obscurity of the poem's textual surface. 'January' and some of Kees's other gloomily domestic poems may well deserve more attention than they have received so far even among Kees's advocates, who generally tend to favour his more avant-gardistic and collage-like work. Yet the fans', critics', and anthologists' lasting recognition of 'For my Daughter' can still be justified by the fact that the earlier text does not only contain most of the later ones' salient points and sentiments, but also conveys these in more concentrated form and with greater emotional force. While this may not have been enough for the sonnet to attract the kind of academic attention bestowed on the works of more established authors, its complex interweaving of a suggestive and thought-provoking variety of themes and poetical traditions, only some of which could be highlighted here, certainly should be.

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