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Conrad Aiken's Preludes for Memnon: A Thematic Analysis

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CONRAD AIKEN'S PRELUDES FOR MEMNON — CHAPIN

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A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

By

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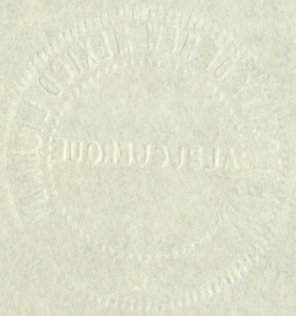

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PREFACE

I

In writing about Conrad Aiken, I have been involved in a labor of love in which I have alternately mistaken the one for the other according to my self-imposed and constantly changing deadlines. In my opinion, the critic is a servant to the poet and little else. He may, perhaps, be an old and trusted servant, but the world of letters is not a democracy, and this servant must know his place if he is to fulfill his service.

Thus my hope is that this essay will be one small contribution in making Conrad Aiken as important and formidable in the eyes of the world as he is in fact. It is difficult to read much of Aiken without feeling, I think, that he has somehow been unjustly neglected in the contemporary assessment of modern poets. Thus it is my further hope that my discernment has anticipated my judgment, and that Conrad Aiken's Preludes for Memnon is treated in the following pages in such a way that his recognition as one of the great American poets will be appreciably facilitated.

II

It may be useful here to briefly summarize the characteristics of Aiken's poetry which emerge in Preludes for Memnon and which seem to me inimical to a widespread success at this point in history. Most obviously, the poem is long. This in itself is a serious

handicap in a time when T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland, with its 434 lines, is considered long, and when the dominant poetic genre may well be the lyric poem. Aiken's propensity for writing long poems makes it difficult for his poems to be anthologized or to appear in magazines. When he has been anthologized or published in periodicals, it has usually been in an excerpted form so that the wholeness of his work has been distorted. Moreover, when his shorter poems have been published in their entirety, an erroneous impression has been created, as his major achievement has certainly been with the long poems. All this means that he has usually first met the public in book form, and the indifferent reception of poetry volumes in our day is too much of a fact to need comment.

A second cause of Aiken's neglect may be seen most clearly if we draw an analogy between his poetry and that of John Milton. He has himself commented on this in Letter Three in the Appendix, in response to one of my questions. If Aiken is right about the "submerged kinship" he feels with Milton's poetry, then we can make a further analogy with Milton's own unpopularity in the twentieth century and apply this to Aiken's work. Aiken's constant though not exclusive use of a five beat iambic line from early in the century to the present has certainly conflicted with the rise of vers libre as a dominant mode of expression. Further, his poetic career has coincided with the origin and the great influence of imagism, yet Aiken's poetry, like Milton's, shows a constant preoccupation with extra-territorial concerns and a corollary tendency for visual imagery to

be subordinated to the verse's music.

A third consideration would be the pervasive influence of the New Critics in our time. Though this is certainly not a movement which can be simply explained, it still seems to have created a demand for poetry which is verbally ambiguous and which is, as Aiken says in Letter Two in the Appendix, antithetical in many respects to what Aiken has attempted; his poetry does not "lend itself to that kind of exegesis."

A fourth possible reason for Aiken's neglect might be found in his willful refusal to participate in the politics or social life which played such an influential part in the period when Ezra Pound was one of the primary means of attaining recognition or publication. Though Aiken was, for a time, an expatriate, he refused to be manipulated by Pound's attempts to regulate his friendships and moved from the literary life of London to a remote town on the Channel, there to develop his own style, a style substantially different from imagism and vers libre.

These reasons are, to some extent, extrinsic to Aiken's poetry and cannot continue their influence indefinitely. There are already some indications that they are weakening, and Aiken's letters to me mention several theses, articles, and dissertations which are being done on his work by younger critics. This is a hopeful sign that his recognition may soon become greater, but despite transitory critical modes and poetic fashions, the reader of Conrad Aiken will still find, I think, that his poetry has a certain intrinsic

vagueness which is made more difficult by his weak dramatic sense. Even more difficult is his complex and profound vision, but it is precisely this which makes him great.

III

In conclusion, I would like to briefly acknowledge my indebtedness to those who helped to shape this essay. Mr. Aiken himself was always reassuring and stimulating because of the interest which he took and the willingness with which he answered questions which no one else could have answered. Mr. Charles Warren, of the University of New Mexico Library, was always helpful in enabling me to circumvent the red tape which otherwise would have greatly hindered me; he understands the problems of the graduate student. Dr. Hoyt Trowbridge has given the English Department a spirit without which this essay would not have seemed worthwhile to me. Dr. Morris Freedman, my thesis committee chairman, has been relaxed where I was not; his friendship and guidance have been immensely helpful. Lastly, my wife, Helen Chapin, has helped me with the innumerable details of preparing the text and has typed the final draft. Without her help and encouragement, I never would have finished.

If Conrad Aiken were remarkable for nothing else, he would be unique in his ability to criticize his own poetry. Perhaps one of the most damaging reviews of his early work was written anonymously by himself about a volume of poems which he has since renounced and decided not to include in his definitive Collected Poems.[1] Writing in 1917 on Nocturne of Remembered Spring, he noted his "tendency to take refuge in an emotional symbolism which lies perilously close to the vague." Elaborating on this, he further said:

> A certain musical continuity or flow is felt, on the technical side; but one cannot be certain of the precise cerebral values. This indicates a failure on Mr. Aiken's part to discriminate between these emotional symbols (the residue of his experience) which are merely paculiar to himself, and those which are common to mankind. He is carried away by successive trains of association which are of immediate and glowing value of himself, but which are quite frequently without pattern for his reader. It is dangerous, too, to develop psychological themes to such lengths as this without a more liberal use of narrative. One gets tired of psychological variations, no matter how contrapuntal or subtle, if no element of suspense is introduced.[2]

Certainly, were this the final word tobe said of his poetry, his review might survive as a literary curio, and this essay would

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[1]Conrad Aiken, Collected Poems (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). All page references to Aiken's poems in the body of the text will refer to this volume.

[2]Conrad Aiken, A Reviewer's ABC (Greenwich: Meridian Books, Inc., 1958), p. 121. First printed anonymously as "Schisophrenia," Chicago News (January 23, 1917), p. 10.

have no purpose. But it is true, I think, that his article, written in 1917, when Aiken still had more than forty years of writing before him, represents a fairly accurate prediction of what would be generally said about him in 1961--when anything is said at all. And it is this situation which presents to the person who has read Aiken in bulk one of the most interesting critical problems in contemporary poetry. For as description, Aiken's statement is still, on the whole, true. But as critical opinion, referring to his later work, it is no longer accurate. Preludes for Memnon, for instance, is marked by "musical continuity" and "psychological variations" developed contrapuntally. Nevertheless, as Aiken has grown he has managed to make out of this musical and psychological material poetry which fulfills all the possibilities inherent in it and to avoid the possible weaknesses which he noted in Nocturne of Remembered Spring. Without denigrating the earlier The Divine Pilgrim, which consists of six "symphonies," I have chosen to begin this study with the later Preludes for Memnon because it seems to me that it is at this point that Aiken comes into full artistic control of the "consistent view" which he had already developed and expressed with varying degrees of success in The Divine Pilgrim.

It is with Preludes for Memnon that Aiken overcomes the limitations of his older work, and attains a new solidity to balance the older tendency to vagueness, at the same time that he retains his characteristically musical, evocative, and contemplative mode.

If Aiken was honest to the point of harshness with his earlier work, he is lyrically honest about the crisis in his life which marked

the occasion of his release into his poetic maturity. It is in the cryptic autobiographical essay, Ushant, that Aiken brings together the twin threads of his life and work, to express and understand their interrelationship in one of the most unique and unclassifiable books of our time.

> In his only partially successful work during the war years D. [Aiken] had, as it were, walked round this 'consistent view', he perhaps only partly knew it was there, or only saw it in angles and fragments, and not all at once for formulated statement, but rather for intermittent and musical reference, by counterpoint and implication. His interest, a holdover from an almost unanalyzable complex of literary influences, and the bright shadows of music and painting as well (for these increasingly pressed him for attention), was still primarily dramatic, fictive, analytic, poetic in the sense that what most concerned him was the making of a 'shape' out of these components, and that in the finding of the 'shape' would be his immediate satisfaction. There must be, of course, a constant fidelity to the consistent view--which lay there, in the somewhat too musical design, but interfused with the possibly too insistent sounds and colors, and therefore, for anyone who was not actively looking for it, out of sight--but the presentation of the 'view' was not as yet the paramount concern, it was treated rather as thematic material, something on which to play variations.[3]

It is in this way that he candidly views his poetry of the first two decades of this century, in preparation for relating the marital breakup which coincided with and, in part, caused the period in which he took more seriously his themes, and ceased to use them merely for demonstrations of virtuosity. "Not for another decade," he says, until he had managed to settle down with his second wife and in the home in Rye, England, which he had once lost and then regained, not until then:

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[3]Conrad Aiken, Ushant (New York and Boston: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, and Little, Brown and Company, 1952), p. 220.

> . . . was the consistent view at last to receive his consistent attention, and to find at last its own expression in the two volumes of parerga, the serial essays toward attitude and definition. The preoccupation had been prolonged and deep: and perhaps it had only needed the shattering disequilibrium . . . .

He then mentions, without detail, a "fatal interview" with his second wife and the necessity of leaving his three children. It is this incident which brings to the surface,

> . . . into full and clear consciousness, as now discoverably the very heart of such conviction as, in his moment of greatest distress, he could hug to his self-inflicted wound.[4]

At this moment he gained an unusual courage and daring which allowed him to give more weight and substance to the introspective meditation which characterizes his earlier work. He seems at this time to have had his personality coalesce and integrate, so that henceforth he is able to speak of "divine" man, and to demand this from others in a way which is reminiscent of Nietzsche, though without Nietzsche's arbitrary reversal of all the accepted values of a society informed by the Christian ethic. He can speak as a hero, and he attempts to give to his readers intimations of what it is to live heroically. With the shyness which he speaks of in Ushant as one of the traits which has always been his, he asks:

> Was there even a queer kind of heroism in this? a setting forth, as Zarathustra would have argued, beyond the pale of good and evil? Must one dare the lightning, invite it to strike one's heart? and thus deal it oneself, at the same time, to others? (Italics mine.)[5]

Clearly, he alludes to his new role as poet--he is to be a maker of

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[4] Ibid., p. 221.

[5] Ibid., p. 222.

values and these are to resolve into the one basic value of the self raised to an heroic stature of awareness and life.

> What had been merely an idea till now, or a system of ideas, which he could contemplate, or disregard, with complete detachment, had now become a terrible and tangible and wonderful world again, like that of which he had learned the first vast and shocking syllables at Savannah; and what, in the realm of personal relationships, in the nexus of society, had been easy and light and habitual, had now, just as suddenly, become fearfully and brilliantly alive, and endless profusion and confusion of every shape and shade of the progressions of love and hate. Values!--The values began a Heraclitean pour such as he hadn't known since he first crawled on his hands and knees.[6]

Thus in middle life Aiken had finally the subject, perfected the "view," with which he could complement his already matured technical ability. He had an experience akin to the mystic's renunciation of all that is ephemeral, and the consequent replacement of an expansion of the self which includes and values all. Aiken's experience was not mystical in the accurate sense of the word for two reasons: it did not lead to a dissolution of personal identity in something infinitely greater, and it was not ineffable; he writes about it fluently and precisely.

> He had not--till then--really known what it was all about. It was as if he had needed to test the reality of his feeling for the little D.'s [his children], or could <u>only</u> test it, by losing them. Was this perhaps true of everything, and everywhere--and was it perhaps only in the profoundest experience of annihilation, and of the dissolution of all hope and pride and identity, in the great glare of cosmic consciousness, that one could regain one's power <u>to value</u>? It certainly looked very like it.[7]

The theme, of its very nature, fits perfectly the musical

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[6]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 223.

[7]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 223.

technique he had already worked out. The best metaphor which man has invented for attempting to express the unknowable delights of heaven or the absolute has been music, and though Aiken is thoroughly secular in outlook, he still has seized on absoluteness as one of his main themes, along with the corollary theme (and as he handles it, it is not separate) of rootedness. Thus the musical propensity which existed in his work virtually from the beginning prevents any possibility of the absolute question of value from disintegrating into the relative question of ethics, which must inevitably tend toward didacticism. No doubt, this is something of what he meant when he intimated in Ushant that he had passed "beyond the pale of good and evil," and the refusal to deal with the transitory questions of morality forces the reader to read the poem as it is without substituting secondary questions. But this is not to say that, from the time of Preludes for Memnon on, he had retained his old interest in evoking an absolute music. This would be to ignore both the poems and the autobiography. Rather, the change is from an absolute music to "an absolute of a more fundamental kind,"[8] one which will incorporate the new insight and unite it with the old music.

But despite his ability to articulate the new and deeper consciousness, there remains a recalcitrant element in the theme of absoluteness that forbids explicit denotation. Aiken's old music, with its peculiarly ethereal quality, is suitable for his theme, as though in deliberate counterpoint to the theme's obstinate opacity.

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[8]See Letter Three in the Appendix, p. 43.

This method has been explained in a review he wrote in Harriet Monroe's Poetry in 1919. Miss Monroe had asked him to review The Charnel Rose, his own poem, and Aiken had seized the occasion to act as his own apologist:

> Suppose I begin with one statement with which everyone will agree: that it is the aim of every work of art to evoke, or to suggest. There is no quarrel here. What artists will disagree on is as to how this shall be done. Some think it should be accomplished by methods mainly denotative--or realistic: they argue that the best way to imply is (in the correct degree) to state. Others believe the method should be mainly connotative: they argue that the best way to state is (in the correct degree) to imply.[9]

As a critical criterion this statement may be most useful for looking at Aiken's work, rather than as a general aesthetic. Is he not naming two separate (and legitimate) aesthetic intentions, and then denying the denotative view its distinction by assuming that it is "the aim of every work of art to evoke, or suggest"? However this may be, it is still Aiken's tacit assumption, that poetry ought always to evoke and suggest, which reveals his own intent.[10]

Aiken's use of implication lends to Preludes for Memnon an air of process and becoming which is appropriate because inherent in his conception of the theme, and which is anticipated in the title. Thus a prelude is something which introduces or foreshadows a principal event and, of course, a musical genre as well. The reference to Memnon which most suggestively fits the poem is to the

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[9] Reviewer's ABC, pp. 126-127.

[10] Completely aware of the poet's tendency to argue on his own behalf in his criticism, Aiken explores this notion at length in "Apologia Pro Species Sua," Reviewer's ABC, pp. 25-34.

gigantic statue at Thebes in Egypt whose stones were reputed to sing at dawn--a prelude to the coming of day, and light. A less direct reference would be to the Ethiopian king of Greek legend who was killed by Achilles and made immortal by Zeus--enforcing to some extent the concept of man's "divinity" which emerges from this poem and others. But most importantly, the fifty-three preludes in the poem are preludes for Memnon to sing while light comes.

For convenience, the poem may be roughly divided into six parts. The continuous "becoming" in the theme makes these divisions arbitrary, but it is one way to grasp the poem's development. Preludes I - XIV involve the narrator speaking to and questioning his unnamed love who remains unnamed and unknown throughout the poem. Before going further, it is necessary to understand the character of Aiken's narrators, since he uses the device quite frequently, and his poems tend to take the form of introspective meditation. Though the narrator speaks personally, he is not an identifiable individual; indeed, he becomes a sort of everyman, or as Aiken said about Festus, "anybody or nobody."[11]

In 1935, four years after Preludes for Memnon was published, he wrote his own advice to poets in an article entitled "A Plea for Anonymity," which is at the same time another example of his

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[11] "Festus is not a Roman emperor, nor the Bishop of Antioch: he is anybody or nobody. His pilgrimage is not real: it is imaginary. It is a cerebral adventure, of which the motive is a desire for knowledge." Collected Poems, p. 871, argument for The Pilgrimage of Festus.

inadvertently promulgating his own aesthetic when he makes general remarks on poetry:

> Our writers must learn once more in the best sense how to stand clear, in order that they may preserve that sort of impersonal anonymity, and that deep and pure provincialism, in which the terms approach universals, and in which alone they will find, perhaps, the freedom for the greatest work.[12]

Lest this be taken as a plea for classicism, it must be remembered that Aiken has also said in a later article, "Back to Poetry," that, "It is in the nature of English poetry to be romantic--so let us have it romantic."[13] Rather, his advocacy of anonymity is a description of the situation which we find in Preludes for Memnon, for the narrator is to a great extent disembodied and separated from his environment in his musing. Since the prelude to a deeper consciousness involves annihilation, as he says in Ushant, the separation of the narrator from any transitory surroundings is one way of coping poetically with and recovering from the prospect of annihilation.

The narrator is only partially comfortable with the mundane world in "Prelude I":

> The alarm-clock ticks, and pulse keeps time with it,
> Night and the mind are full of sounds. I walk
> From the fire-place, with its imaginary fire,
> To the window, with its imaginary view.
> Darkness, and the snow ticking the window: silence,
> And the knocking of chains on a motor-car, the tolling
> Of a bronze bell, dedicated to Christ. (p. 499.)

The ticking of the alarm clock is blended with the snow ticking on

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[12] Conrad Aiken, "A Plea for Anonymity," New Republic, LXXXIV (September 18, 1935), 155-157.

[13] Reviewer's ABC, p. 102

the window. The use of the word "ticking" for the snow demonstrates an acute sensibility; only an intent listener would perceive the similarity of the noise of snow and an alarm-clock. It further acts to emphasize the night's extreme quiet; only in the virtually complete absence of sound could snow be said to tick. But the silence is only momentary and is broken almost immediately:

> And then the uprush of angelic wings, the beating
> Of wings demonic, from the abyss of the mind:
> The darkness filled with a feathery whistling, wings
> Numberless as the flakes of angelic snow,
> The deep void swarming with wings and sound of wings,
> The winnowing of chaos, the aliveness
> Of depth and depth and depth dedicated to death.
> (pp. 498-499.)

And as in the first stanza of this prelude ("The mind too has its snows . . ."), the external environment is essentially an extension of the mind's consciousness, controlled and interpreted by the individual's perception:

> Here are the bickerings of the inconsequential,
> The chatterings of the ridiculous, the iterations
> Of the meaningless. Memory, like a juggler,
> Tosses its colored balls into the light, and again
> Receives them into darkness. Here is the absurd,
> Grinning like an idiot, and the omnivorous quotidian
> Which will have its day. (p. 499.)

So the "generic I"[14] of the poem is wakened into consciousness by the sudden, and spectacular, awareness of the inconsequential, ridiculous, and meaningless. He sees the "omnivorous quotidian"

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[14]The "generic I" is a term used by Aiken in his notes to Senlin: A Biography (Collected Poems, p. 870). In "Back to Poetry" (Reviewer's ABC, pp. 93-103), he discusses the poet's need "to isolate for feeling and contemplation the relation 'I-World'."

out of which it is his task to make some sense and, if possible, to rearrange into some order and beauty. As is often true with Aiken, the "images" are predominantly aural: ticking, knocking, tolling, beating, whistling, bickerings, chatterings, and iterations are among the operative words used to convey the sense of this opening scene, and the dominant contrast is with silence which represents all the potentiality of sound unrealized at the same time that it is necessary for music. This concept appears when "Prelude I" closes, and when the nameless love is first invoked:

> Here is the silence of silences
> Which dreams of becoming a sound, and the sound
> Which will perfect itself in silence. And all
> These things are only the uprush from the void,
> The wings angelic and demonic, the sound of the abyss
> Dedicated to death. And this is you. (p. 500.)

The identification of the love with chaos and destruction in the last sentence is noticeable in Preludes for Memnon, but the loved woman is apparently primarily a companion whose ultimate efficacy in aiding the "I" achieve a complete awareness is severely limited. For this reason, she seems to be a source of irritation and is regarded with some disdain. Thus in "Prelude II," she is addressed impersonally as "woman" or "lady," and after the two arrange a clandestine though gloomy meeting to escape their mutual terror, he gives her his mouth "to stop your murmur." It is an affectionate gesture, though not so much from impatience to get on with loving, but because the "I" wants to lie silent:

> And think of Hardy, Shakspere, Yeats and James;
> Comfort our panic hearts with magic names;
> Stare at the ceiling, where the taxi lamps
> Make ghosts of light; and see, beyond this bed,

> That other bed in which we will not move;
> And whether joined or separate, will not love. (p. 501.)

The most important thing about these writers, at least for the moment, is that they are dead, and this is what the narrator contemplates as he lies with this lady.

Finally, there is a brief and fitful sleep, and the "I" has a dream which is, if anything, more chaotic than the daily world because it is no escape and makes his situation even more desperate since no illusions can persist: "What monstrous world is this, whence no escape / Even in sleep." (p. 501.) And then, ten lines later:

> Dream: and between the close-locked lids of dream
> The terrible infinite intrudes its blue:
> Ice: silence: death: the abyss of Nothing. (p. 501.)

This is followed by a prayer for deliverance in terms unique to Aiken:

> O God, O God, let the sore soul have peace.
> Deliver it from this bondage of harsh dreams.
> Release this shadow from its object, this object
> From its shadow. (p. 502.)

Thus a way out of this despair is presented in terms of separation from the mundane object into depths of darkness until, when memory is gone, there is some rest. He prays, in the last line of the "Prelude III" that there be no "remembrance of a torn world well forgot."

But as the entire poem is subtitled Preludes to Attitude, so this despairing outburst is found to be only one possible attitude to chaos; it is tried and then rejected in "Prelude IV":

> Or say that in the middle comes a music
> Suddenly out of silence, and delight
> Brings all that chaos to one mood of wonder;
> A seed of fire, fallen in a tinder world;
> And instantly the whirling darkness fills
> With conflagration; upspoutings of delirium;
> Cracklings and seethings; the melting of rocks, the bursts
> Of flame smoke-stifled, twisting, smoke-inwreathed;
> Magnificence; the whole dark filled with light;
> And then a silence, as the world falls back
> Consumed, devoured, its giant corolla shrivelled;
> And in the waning light, the pistil glowing,
> Glowing and fading; and on that shrinking stage--
> Whisper it, how among the whispering ashes
> Her pale bright beauty comes, the moon's dark daughter
> Lighting those ruins with her radiant madness . . . (p. 502.)

In this momentary vision the chaos is brightened enormously, so much as to inspire wonder--but it still remains chaos, and is essentially only a more spectacular form of the "omnivorous quotidian." But in it there is some inkling of what a more permanent answer might be, for out of the silence music suddenly comes, and this is different from the mere noise which the "I" heard in "Prelude I"; it points the way to at least one other potentiality to be found in silence. And despite the equally sudden appearance of the "moon's dark daughter" to briefly eliminate the ruins of chaos, her hopefulness turns almost immediately to a tearful despair much like that the "I" has already suffered, and "Prelude IV" resolves also into silence:

> And the long silence begins, the silence that was
> And is and will be; creeps round her; rises coldly;
> And all is still; the world her hope, and she. (p. 503.)

"Prelude V" is crucial to the "I"; in his meditation he utterly forgets for the moment his lady, though conceivably he could be speaking to her as well as to himself and the reader. Perhaps she was fused in his mind with the moon's daughter who figured in his

dream, but she is not spoken to until the next prelude when she evidently has questioned the validity of his musing on "despair, that seeking for the ding-an-sich," the nature of symbols, and their final inadequacy for expressing reality. They are as ephemeral as any object:

> Catch a beam in your hands, a beam of light,
> One bright golden beam, fledgling of dust,
> Hold it a moment, and feel its heart, and feel
> Ethereal pulse of light between your fingers:
> Then let it escape from you, and find its home
> In darkness, mother of light: and this will be
> Symbol of symbol, clue to clue, auricle of heart. (p. 503.)

The symbol of symbols is thus this picture of impossibility, catching a light beam whose home is the dark. Though the symbol may cast a momentary beam, it fades as soon as it illuminates, and though it is an "auricle [a word with two meanings and a pun] of heart," the symbol cannot reach the matter's heart:

> The glass breaks, and the liquid is spilled; the string
> Snaps, and the music stops; the moving cloud
> Covers the sun, and the green field is dark.
> These too are symbols: and as far and near
> As those; they leave the silver core uneaten;
> The golden leaf unplucked; the bitter calyx
> Virginal; and the whirling You unknown. (p. 503.)

With this the fifth prelude ends, and the poet is brought back to his questioning lover whom he addresses with some indignation though, as before, mingled with affection:

> This is not you? these symbols are not you?
> Not snowflake, cobweb, raindrop? . . . Woman, woman
> You are too literal, too strict with me.
> What would you have? Some simple copper coin--
> I love you, you are lovely, I adore you?
> Or better still, dumb silence and a look? (p. 504.)

Again the poet rests for a moment in the possibility of silence as an

attitude, and again, despite its rich suggestiveness, it is not enough:

> No, no, this will not do; I am not one
> For whom these silences are sovereign;
> The pauses in the music are not music,
> Although they make the music what it is.
> Therefore I thumb once more the god's thesaurus,
> For phrase and praise, and find it all for you. (p. 505.)

In Aiken's metaphorical terms, the ultimate after which the "I" is groping will be the music for which these preludes are intended, and though silence is for it an ever recurring necessity, it is simply not the music itself.

From this point on in the first group of fourteen preludes, the metaphor of music is abruptly dropped until later in the poem. The poet now speaks in terms drawn from nature (especially plants and insects) in a way which effectively links these preludes with the subordinate metaphor of the world as a flower in the first six preludes. These nature images play around the general theme of fertility which is in turn connected with the fertility of the word. Along with this, the poet's relation to his lady has become more affectionate as his meditations become actualized, and he tells her to:

> Conceive: be fecundated by the word.
> Hang up your mind for the intrusion of the wind.
> Be blown, be blown, like a handful of withered seed,
> Or a handful of leaves in autumn. Blow, blow,
> Careless of where you blow, or to what end,
> Or whether living or dying. Go with the wind,
> Whirl and return, lodge in a tree, detach,
> Sail on a stream in scarlet for trout to stare at,
> Comfortless, aimless, brilliant. There is nothing
> So suits the soul as change. (p. 506.)

The sexual overtones in this passage evoke the contrasting polarities of impotence ("withered seed," dead leaves) and fertile power in the rhythm that rushes, slows, rushes, then slows finally to a peaceful rest which is followed by silence and in the next paragraph with a muted and whispered conversation of philosophical intimacy:

> You have no name:
> And what you call yourself is but a whisper
> Of that divine and deathless and empty word
> Which breathed all things to motion. You are you?
> But what is you? (p. 507.)

And then, some lines later:

> Go down and up again, go in and out,
> Drink of the black and bright, bathe in the bitter,
> Burn in the fiercest, and be light as ash. (p. 507.)

Here for the first time in Preludes for Memnon Aiken suggests the sex theme which in Ushant he calls one of his twin divinites:

> Sex and art, art and sex: the twinned and ambiguous voices chimed harmoniously or discordantly everywhere, denied each other only then to embrace each other, or so naughtily mimicked each other as to be at times quite tantalizing, indistinguishable. If the dream was all sex, rooted all in love, was art therefore, too, nothing but an instinctive love-song, a song of glory, praise of the life-force in its very essence, the becomingness of sex? Could it be anything but a compulsory--if infinitely elaborate--celebration of the will to live? and in that case, had the individual, the artist, any say in the matter, any freedom at all?[15]

The dilemma this poses for Aiken is intimated in "Prelude VIII," though still only in embryonic form. But the mixed satisfaction and dissatisfaction which th "I" of the poem experiences result from the frustration of intimacy only partially realized, so that the real identity of the "I" and his love is still essentially hidden. The

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[15] Ushant, pp. 177-178.

sexual experience is followed by a philosophical disquisition which seems, at least for the moment, to leave behind flesh and blood. The sense of incompleteness leads the "I" to postulate a more ideal order:

> You might have been a sparkle of clear sand.
> You, who remember for a twinkling instant
> All things, or what you think all things to be,
> Whose miseries consume you, or whose joys
> Hoist you to heaven, such heaven as you will:
> You might have been a dream dreamed in a dream
> By someone dreaming of God, and dreamed by God.
> You might indeed have been a God, a star,
> A world of stars and Gods, a web of time;
> You might have been the word that breathed the world.
> (p. 507.)

But she is not, and cannot be, a God or star; she is all too human. Again in Ushant, Aiken further delineates the relationship art has with sex for him, and the alternate freedom and bondage he experiences depending on which way the balance, for the time being, has swung. Answering the question of the artist's freedom which he had posed for himself, he says:

> Bewildering questions, one was for a long time to be caught in that logical predicament, and to feel that there were only two possible alternatives: either the individual was a 'healthy' or true child of nature, of the natura rerum, in which case he was automatically and helplessly her servant, her unconscious spokesman and celebrant, her predetermined victim, her slave, and incapable therefore of assuming any pride of identity or originality or virtue; or he rebelled, and ascended magnificently into the empyrean, out of time and space, like Lucifer in starlight, for a treasonable and independent view of the primum mobile, in which case he was forced to admit that he was ipso facto unhealthy, and from nature's point of view defective. D. was not for many years to see beyond this somewhat specious 'either or' dilemma, with its fine use of logical exclusiion, although the comprehensive vision of an evolving consciousness in an evolving world--a synthesis which could accomodate healthy and unhealthy alike, finding use in all--was already implicit in his very awareness of the problem. For a long time he took pride in saying of himself

that he was a yea-sayer--in Nietzsche's phrase--a yea-sayer who found nothing to say yea to.[16]

This ambivalence is at least partially resolved in Aiken's work at about the time of Preludes for Memnon, as hard as it is to give specific dates to an "evolving consciousness." But certainly, the dichotomy between the "true child of nature" and the aching desire to leave time and space are equally present in this poem as the different attitudes develop.

"Prelude XI" and "Prelude XII" use a golden fly, spider, and web as central metaphors for the predicament of man in a vast and alien universe. They have their solace and pleasures, but finally they are locked in servitude to nature and are hence fundamentally incapable of "assuming any pride of identity or originality or virtue."

> Address him how you will, this golden fly,--
> This dung-fed gildling of a summer's day:
> He'll have his time, will buzz and come and go,
> Visit the queenliest flowers, suck his fill,
> Fatten himself to glory, and be dead. (p. 510.)

The "dung-fed" fly is transformed subtly into a bee by Aiken in order to suggest the alternative possibilities which the two face, though all the alternatives are bounded by death. The metaphor is completed in the next prelude, and its connection with mankind is made more explicit:

> Poor fool, deluded toy, brief anthropomorph,
> You who depend at centre of your web,
> Thinking the web projected from yourself
> With all its silver spokes and drops of dew,
> Its antic flies and frantic wings, and such,--

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[16] Ibid., p. 178.

> Consider now if you yourself are not
> Created by the web. (p. 511.)

The ironic phrase "brief anthropomorph" gives to man, struggling like an insect, the slight dignity of a polysyllabic name despite his humiliating briefness. It is juxtaposed to the remarkable use of the word "depend" which Aiken uses in a way that brings to bear on his theme all the word's semantic potentialities--chiefly: hanging down (and all that suggests) and contingency. It is perhaps this possible attitude which suggests why he could think of himself as a "yea-sayer who found nothing to say yea to." Speaking again to the deluded anthropomorph, he says:

> You dream the world? Alas, the world dreamed you.
> And you but give it back, distorted much
> By the poor brain-digestion, which you call
> Intelligence, or vision, or the truth. (p. 511.)

But this biological gloominess is followed rapidly by the daybreak which gives to the "I" an inexplicable, for the moment at least, desire to affirm what he has just denigrated. There is in this a microcosmic analogy with the poem as a whole when we remember that Memnon's stones sang to greet the day which came to illuminate what had been black through the night. There is also a tenuous connection with the night the "I" and his lady have spent in unfulfilled love and questioning of identity. It is tenuous because their "story" is of little consequence in comparison to the greater implications of how their consciousness has developed, and their realization that the unfulfilled knowledge of themselves is at the same time a recognition of the importance of this knowledge, and that in the end this may save them from being merely analogous to flies and spiders, and

their empty anthropomorphism may have the potentiality of selfhood.

> This is morning?
> All hail to selfhood, who is come refreshed
> From nightlong dark digestion of the things
> He trapped from chaos of the yesterday.
> And here is noon, and rest; and here is evening,
> With all those golden flies which yet remain
> For conquest by the cunning. Self is strong:
> He shapes the world as should be. He is wise:
> He understands the world as food. He spins
> The broken rim anew, and calls it good. (p. 512.)

The "omnivorous quotidian" of "Prelude I" reappears here as a condition of the world's nature and perhaps of the attainment of selfhood as well ("he understands the world as food"), though as a preliminary attitude it seems to contain some confusion of selfishness or graspingness with selfhood. But there is also the belief that the world can be shaped as it ought to be, a markedly resolute attitude in comparison to the more impotent wishing for things to be different in "Prelude VIII."

The plan of the poem becomes clearer now as we see the emerging attitudes in each prelude blend and contrast with what has gone before, and we see Aiken's concept of an evolving consciousness being actualized in the poem as new attitudes rise to the surface shaped and anticipated by the old. This first group of preludes which I have roughly delimited as the poet speaking to his love ends with the next prelude and is followed by Preludes XIV - XIX. These preludes incorporate a song of meditation in which the "I" for the first time in the poem leaves the earth for a sustained, "treasonable and independent view of the primum mobile." But before this, the "I" is reconciled somewhat to his love and there is a kind of forebearance which could not have existed without the newly discovered

knowledge that a sudden and complete unveiling of the world's mysteries is essentially antithetical to the developing of selfhood. This gives the "I" a patient tolerance which links the two in their lack of fulfillment because their estrangement is not the fault of either.

> So we pace
> From here to there, from there to here,--touch hands
> As alien each to each as leaf and stone,
> One chaos and another. Have good heart!
> Your chaos is my world; perhaps my chaos
> Is world enough for you. For what's unguessed
> Will have such shape and sweetness as the knowing
> Ruins with pour of knowledge. From one bird
> We guess the tree, and hear the song; but if
> Miraculous vision gives us, all at once,
> The universe of birds and boughs, and all
> The trees and birds from which their time has come,--
> The world is lost . . .
> Love, let us rest in this. (pp. 513-514.)

Now that the different themes which are intertwined in the poem's beginning have been separated from each other to an extent, it is possible to proceed more rapidly through the poem and to demonstrate how these carying attitudes are enlarged and transmuted as the "I" becomes more and more heroically conscious of what it is to be human. "Prelude XIV" begins with a contemplation of the rootedness which evolves into a basic component of Aiken's "view." It is clear that consciousness must, by definition, be futile if it does not have something to be conscious of. And in Aiken's view, the consciousness must be rooted in its "inheritance, time, and place."[17] But there is at this point in Preludes for Memnon a great awareness of some unknown abyss which threatens the poet's very life, and makes rootedness

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[17]See Letter Two in the Appendix, p. 41.

a hope rather than an actuality. In a dialogue in which it is impossible to ascertain exactly what is happening dramatically, the "I" opens "Prelude XIV" with the question: "--You went to the verge, you say, and come back safely? / Some have not been so fortunate,--some have fallen." (p. 514.) What we have is part of Aiken's conception of what it is to come close to the threat of annihilation, and then to find there the very rootedness which has been lacking.

> --I saw at length
> The space-defying pine, that on the last
> Outjutting rock has cramped its powerful roots.
> There stood I too: under that tree I stood:
> My hand against its resinous bark: my face
> Turned out and downward to the fourfold kingdom.
> The wind roared from all quarters. The waterfall
> Came down, it seemed, from Heaven. The mighty sound
> Of pouring elements,--earth, air, and water,--
> The cry of eagles, chatter of falling stones,--
> These were the frightful language of that place.
> I understood it ill, but understood.-- (p. 514.)

Thus at this crucial revelation of what it is to pass beyond mere preludes and into whatever it is they precede, Aiken returns to the metaphors of music and noise, and the sound that was heard in an amalgam of celestial sweetness and a natural racket reminiscent of the windy noise made by the angels in "Prelude I" and which came from the "abyss of the mind." The move has been made from a searching solipsism, similar to the "brief anthropomorph" who thinks he has made the web that really entangles him, to a wider and deeper consciousness enriched by the rapport with the woman and by the increasing realization that the self must come to itself by expanding outward, for whoever has been to the verge has seen God and the "ruin in which godhead lives." (p. 515.) And in this ruin are "sadness unplumbed," "misery without bound," wailing and joy, wreckage and flowers, hatred and

love--and the self. It is here that we first see Aiken's belief in the possibilities of man, if not the actualities, and understand why he thought of himself as a yea-sayer.

> --And this alone awaits you, when you dare
> To that sheer verge where horror hangs, and tremble
> Against the falling rock; and, looking down,
> Search the dark kingdom. It is to self you come,--
> And that is God. It is the seed of seeds:
> Seed for disastrous and immortal worlds.
>
> It is the answer that no question asked. (p. 515.)

Thus, in some imaginary land's end, the self becomes God, if one dares to look at the swirling chaos below. The woman who has seen this has not returned unscathed; she is seen in the next prelude as a "porcelain girl" whose life has left her. (p. 516.) The "I" puzzles over what exactly has been seen. He wonders what could have been so revealing and at the same time leave her drained of the life she once had. But it is all absurd; the "I" looks elsewhere:

> And I will go to music--
>
> No, not music!
> The thing itself--by God, the thing is music. (p. 517.)

And in this music, as with the woman, the "I" knows what it is to dare to be larger than he is. In a prelude which ecstatically evokes what this glimpse of heaven is, the poet ends by affirming what he now is: "I become music, chaos, light, and sound; / I am no longer I: I am a world." (p. 518.) At this point, Aiken's lack of a dramatic sense obscures the reasons and causes for this exaltation which the "I" feels. There is, for instance, what seems to be a minor, but revealing, slip in this prelude's first line: "Coruscation of glass--so said he, sharply--." (p. 516.) The "so said he" indicates a

narrator who is outside the poem, but who is nowhere in evidence except at this point. The entire poem is otherwise related in the first person, except for occasional interjections from the woman which are answered without narrative bridges. This is, of course, insignificant in itself, but it is a reminder that the poem has proceeded this far, and proceeds much farther, without any narrative events to lend substantiality and probability to the poem's central "action" of a developing consciousness. For example, the dialogue in "Prelude XIV" comes almost out of nowhere, and though it contains some concrete and believable representations of the "abyss" humans face, it still must be said that the second person of the dialogue speaks with essentially the same voice we have heard from the "I" throughout the poem. And though the abyss may be believable, it is easier to believe that the "I", being the thoughtful and expressive one, has really been the one who has made the trip to the verge, rather than another. To be sure, this lack of a narrative sense can also be considered as an excess of Aiken's strength in evoking the feeling of complex psychological and emotional states which may, in fact, have little grounding in external events. It may be as unwise to demand a plot from this poem as it would be to demand one from an oratorio. That is, the developing and varying emotional states (or attitudes, in Aiken's terms) are in themselves the plot, though the word must be used loosely here and not in a dramatic sense. Aiken, of course, recognized this in his essay on Nocturne of Remembered Spring when he said about it that suspense must be introduced into a work of this kind no matter how subtle the psychological variations. But he

has never completely avoided this trait. For instance, his autobiography is the only one I have ever read in which some knowledge of the man's life was essential for an understanding of the book. But it is this same trait--this impatience with the mundane world of fact--which enables him to speak in his unique idiom. And it may be, after all, that the inexplicable nature of what happens to the "I" of this poem is as true as the order of other poetry.

Whatever may be the case, it is true that the poem tends constantly toward the individual predicament, and with Preludes XX - XXV there is a retreat into quiet while the "I" ponders eternity as though to halt the flux and process of the world as it seems to him. "Prelude XIX" ends in bringing home the tumultous chaos forcibly enough to warrant the restrained and peaceful mood of the next prelude, as it also suggests the fitness of the prelude form Aiken has used to fit his conception of the world as prelude itself:

> This is the world: there is no more than this.
> The unseen and disastrous prelude, shaking
> The trivial act from the terrific action.
> Speak: and the ghosts of change, past and to come,
> Throng the brief world. The maelstrom has us all. (p. 520.)

The conviction that the maelstrom is our constant environment drives the "I" to the "simple cloister" where all is waiting and in suspension. It is entirely possible that this type of "suspense" fills the need Aiken noted in his earlier poem for suspense, and if so, it is unique to Aiken in that it is distinct from the usual dramatic concept. No action waits to be resolved, but the preceding chaos and change are held back ("suspended") while a new theme advances so that the reader anticipates what may follow:

> Here the lizard waits
> For the slow snake to slide among cold leaves.
> And, on the bough that arches the deep pool,
> Lapped in a sound of water, the brown thrush
> Waits, too, and listens, till his silence makes
> Silence as deep as song. And time becomes
> A timeless crystal, an eternity,
> In which the gone and coming are at peace. (p. 521.)

If we allow the poem to set the standards by which it is to be judged, it becomes clear that this prelude's silence is an example of the silence not being the music, but making the music what it is.

What follows is a series of notes which break out, in "Prelude XXI," into a "chord of chords" of divine music. But it is all bounded by the persistent sense of change and accident which, however, brings the "I" and his woman into a closer relationship as "things compounded of time's heart-beats." (p. 522.) This leads the pair to a rhythmical dance "from blood to beauty,-- / From beauty back to blood?" (p. 524.) This implies that the constant change in their lives is gradually becoming structured in a kind of harmony which can lead them to some mastery of their chaotic lives--though the chaos may have to remain.

And as they incorporate their changing attitudes, theyfind that they too are involved in the law of flux: "The 'I' changes, and with it the 'you'." (p. 526.) The two are still so little conscious of their own identities that they periodically feel that they are undone "With permanence in impermanence, the flowing / Of shape to shape which means all shapelessness." (p. 527.) Mastery then is essentially to be found in the acknowledgement of this change and in making rich the moments which are given to us as our own which, in

terms of the poem's technique, are analogous to the silence which makes the music. There results from this concept a kind of awe and reverence like the compulsion to whisper in a solemn environment:

> Thus we reach
> The mystery with hot and vascular hands,
> Insensitive; it perishes as we touch,
> Perishes like the snowflake. (p. 529.)

But most importantly, it leads to a courage which gives to any man who can dare it his divinity: "We are but lightning on a sea of chaos; / The flash on sad confusion which is god." (p. 529.) When the flux of life is accepted and assented to, then man may find his godhood, not in permanence where he has expected to find it, but in that very change which is itself the only immutable fact of man's existence. There is power in this just as lightning is almost pure power, and its prime property is its ability to illuminate and shock. Illumination may only reveal the "sea of chaos" underneath, but this does not erase the fact of the illumination nor of the power of which we are capable. The lightning has taken its transitory, but natural, shape.

In the next group of preludes, the "I" returns his full attention to his love. Preludes XXVI - XXXII question primarily the fact of death, an appropriate sequel to a section dealing with the ubiquitousness of change. Though in this change may lie the mystery, still the secret vanishes as soon as touched "like the snowflake."

> So, death being dead, and love to hatred changed,
> The fern to marble, and the hour to snow;
> Music become the noise of worms, and all
> This dance of stars a senseless rout of atoms . . . (p. 531.)

This is said after what appears to be a vague and dreamlike

crucifixion (XXVI) which never materializes except in its effect on the "I." And as with the archetypal Christian crucifixion, there is not a complete end with death. But in Aiken's terms, this realization is colored by the conviction of meaninglessness which produces, not a hopeless resurrection, but a resurrection which is fundamentally preposterous, though it is all that we have. As the flash of lightning may in itself be powerful though bounded by chaos, so our lives have beauty, which is all the more beautiful because "we know that beauty meaningless." (p. 532.) But though aesthetically conceivable, this idea is not likely to give solace for very long unless one is feeling unusually perverse or theoretical, and the "I" finds it only momentarily satisfactory. He is brought sharply after this to the horror of time's passing, as regularly as a clock ticks, and though he may have seen briefly the "all," it is just as true that he has seen the "nothing." (XXVIII.) In his frustration, he vents on his love all the accumulated spleen and disillusion which have resulted from his vision of "this mad world of mirrors." (p. 535.)

> What are we made of, strumpet, but of these?
> Nothing. We are the sum of all these accidents--
> Compounded all our days of idiot trifles,-- (p. 534.)

This gloom and despair, forced on him by a logic of "dark blood," leads him to look hopelessly and vehemently for "that noble mind that knows no evil." (p. 536.) A "noble mind" does not exist for the tormented "I," and even if he did, he would only be the object of revenge: "If there is such, we'll have him out in public, / And have his heart out too." (p. 536.)

The whole movement of this section is toward a kind of

derangement which alternately raves and finds its only solace in the very flux which is the cause of the increasing delirium. This continues in Preludes XXXII - XLVI to such a degree that the "I" begins to have a nightmarish insight into the meaninglessness he perceives, and which leads him at times almost to hysteria. This nadir has been anticipated by the constant tendency of the "I" to search for the unity in his world and the constant tendency of this same world to separate into contradictory dualities. For instance, the "I" earlier found hope in the "silences" of life, his musical analogy for the brief moments given irrevocably to him alone, and which, though not the music, make the music what it is. But it is just as possible, depending upon mood and attitude, to feel these silences as complete nothingness.

> Then came I to the shoreless shore of silence,
> Where never summer was nor shade of tree,
> Nor sound of water, nor sweet light of sun,
> But only nothing and the shore of nothing . . . (p. 538.)

Similarly, the image of the transitory lightning on a chaotic sea intrinsically contains a potent cause of hopelessness as well as for the brief hope that the "I" earlier found.

The only way to regain touch with something substantial, to obtain the rootedness which is necessary for the free-floating "I," is in the memory of Memnon. It is this image which, though not quantitatively dominant, virtually provides the only solidity within the poem. But this solidity can only be attained by an effort of the will, the same audacity that it takes to make an anguished man affirm his own divinity--or the same madness.

> See that yourselves shall be as Memnon was.
> Then, if you have the strength to curse the darkness,
> And praise a world of light, remember Memnon--
> Stone feet in sand, stone eyes, stone heart, stone lips,
> Who sang the day before the daybreak came. (p. 543.)

Emotionally, this constant shifting from despair to hope and back again is understandable as the constant wavering man can undergo without any readily apparent relation to the external state of the environment. Intellectually, it may be at least partially explained by the feeling Aiken had had that he might have passed beyond good and evil. The absence of certainty results in the inability of the "I" to evaluate anything except in the most relative terms--the immediate state of his feelings. Assuming that one has passed beyond sublunary moral considerations, how is one to value experience except in terms of subjective feeling? The "I" has something of the same inability to value, that Aiken records himself as having before the time when he felt that he "had known what it was all about." And for Aiken, this meant not finding a new certainty but, as he says in Ushant, in profoundly experiencing annihilation. And part of this annihilation is found in the disintegration of the very power to value which is sought, that all may be valued without reservation: "Truth is a lie when worshipped as the truth; / The lie a truth when worshipped as a lie." (p. 544.)

This extreme realtivism leads the "I" to say later that "The world is everlasting-- / But for a moment only. . . ." (p. 530.) Though this might perhaps be considered an easy paradox out of context, it is appropriate in the light of the final section of the poem, and it is at this point that the themes are brought together, and the

symbol of Memnon is used for one of the few times outside of the title:

> The world is everlasting--
>
> But for a moment only,
> The sunrise sunset moment at the pit's edge,
> The night in day, timeless for a time:
> Childhood is old age, youth is maturity,
> Simplicity is power, the single heart
> Cries like Memnon for the sun, his giant hand
> Lifting the sun from the eastern hill, and then
> Handing it to the west--
>
> And in that moment
> All known, all good, all beautiful; the child
> Ruling his god, as god intends he should. (p. 550.)

This is preceded by an allusion to a man hanged for murder of the "word," implying that the way to an acceptance and valuing of the world lies finally in an extra-literary path, though the "word" has certainly led the "I" part of the way he has gone. The crucifixion image used earlier is revived here and fused with the hanged man, who rises to control god, and in the next prelude (XLV), the "I" speaks with an anonymous dead man, who seems to have been to the brink or "verge" or "pit's edge" which plays such a recurring role in Aiken's poem:

> His eyes were dark and wide and cold and empty
> As if his vision had become a grave
> Larger than bones of any world could fill
> But crystal clear and deep and deeply still. (p. 551.)

He it is who has read "Time in the rock and in the human heart" (p. 551.), a line which gives Aiken titles for two of his later poems.[18] The dead man has seen too much, and his imagination has aped "God, the

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[18] Time in the Rock or Preludes to Definition, Collected Poems, pp. 665-757; And in the Human Heart, Collected Poems, pp. 758-779.

symbol of Reason [illegible]

title:

The world is [illegible]

The [illegible]

The [illegible]

Unlabored [illegible]

Shapeless [illegible]

Cries [illegible]

Lifting [illegible]

Beating [illegible]

All known, all [illegible]

Ruling [illegible]

This is preceded [illegible]

"word," implying [illegible]

world like [illegible]

certainly [illegible]

image used earlier [illegible]

rises to control [illegible]

with an accompanying [illegible]

"verge" or "pit's edge" [illegible]

poem:

His eyes [illegible]

As if his [illegible]

Larger [illegible]

But crystal [illegible]

He it is who has [illegible]

(p. 591.), a line [illegible]

The dead man has [illegible]

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pp. 659-721) Also [illegible]

supreme poet of despair." (p. 551.) But it is also he who gives to the "I" a sense of the redemption to be found in life, and the responsibilities and risks of which become the main theme in the closing part of the poem:

> And with that cold profound unhating eye
> He moved the universe from east to west,
> Slowly, disastrously,--but with such splendor
> As god, the supreme poet of delight, might evny,--
> To the magnificent sepulchre of sleep. (p. 552.)

This meeting with the man killed by his vision of life clarifies the alternatives which confront the wavering "I," and in the next prelude (XLVI), he finds himself in a tiny room which circumscribes all his life. It is intolerable; he calls himself a "deluded sentimentalist" (p. 553.) and urges himself not to stay forever in the one room, the way to "No Man's Land." (p. 553.)

The final section of the poem, Preludes XLVII - LXII, begins with the next prelude, and here the "I" himself goes to the "verge" with the aid of his will, and his new ability to confront the actual changing nature of the world without shrinking and without dismay. The time of annihilation arrives with the man from the dead; it is the day "which impotent and dying men desired." (p. 553.) It is the day when they may be relieved of their daily miseries in the "magnificent sepulchre of sleep." Those men who prematurely relinquish their lives merely because of death are scorned:

> O pitiful servants of a servant's servant
> Eaters of myth, devourers of filth, cowards
> Who flee the word's edge as you flee the sword,
> Slaves of the clock's heart, serfs of history,
> Low minions of the word-- (p. 554.)

At this point, the crucifixion image appears once more, with

the addition of scorn for the idea of crucifixion:

> We are the sons
> Of that bright light that knows no turning back;
> We the prometheans who never die;
> The crucified, who scorn our crucifixion,
> Because we know our fate was in ourselves;
> We are the Jesus and the Judas too. (p. 554.)

The integrity of the individual person and his efficacy in solving the world's riddle is affirmed with a sophisticated paganism and scorn which raise the "I" almost to an anti-Christ. This concept also recalls Nietzschean emphasis on will which informed the initial conception of the poem in Aiken's mind. This refusal of pity of any sort, for oneself or for those who acquiesce to the necessary crucifixion faced by all men in the flux and decay of the world, is essentially heroic. The ultimate sufficiency of the individual who can face courageously what lies at the "verge" in the depths of the human psyche is affirmed: "No gods abandon us, for we are gods . . ." (p. 554.) This is the constant theme of the final section of the poem, and "Prelude L" ends in an invocation of the risk which this involves: "O humans! Let us venture still, and die, / Alternately, of madness and of truth." (p. 558.)

Madness, truth, and independence--here Aiken's basic attitude becomes clear. One thinks of Wordsworth's poem "Resolution and Independence":

> By our own spirits are we deified:
> We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
> But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.[19]

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[19]William Wordsworth, "Resolution and Independence," The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 155-157.

Also, there are perhaps more literary references in this poem than in any other by Aiken, and it is interesting to note the way in which he handles these. In "Prelude II" he laments the passing of Hardy, James, Conrad, Moore, Yeats, and Shakespeare; none is dominantly Romantic, and all are dead to the poet. But in the end of the poem, he returns to the poets, and here he mentions Shelley, Verlaine, and Rimbaud. They are living in a way in which the other poets had not; Aiken does more than name them, he invokes them and even dramatizes them in some of the few really dramatic passages in the book:

> Rimbaud and Verlaine, precious pair of poets,
> Genius in both (but what is genius?) playing
> Chess on a marble table at an inn
> . . . . . .
> Verlaine puts down his pawn upon a leaf
> And closes his long eyes, which are dishonest,
> And says 'Rimbaud, there is one thing to do:
> We must take rhetoric, and wring its neck! . . .'
> Rimbaud considers gravely, moves his Queen;
> And then removes himself to Timbuctoo. (pp. 564-656.)

Though the action is minimal, there is an attempt to localize the scene and speech which is rare in the poem. Similarly, Shelley is mentioned in a way which suggests that there is something in his life (and not necessarily his poetry) which lends itself to the themes Aiken has expressed:

> O come, like Shelley,
> For God's sake let us sit on honest ground
> And tell harsh stories of the deaths of kings! (p. 561.)

In short, the poets that live at all in the poem are primarily Romantics.

This accords with Aiken's concept of English poetry as Romantic when it is at its best. In "Back to Poetry," as essay

already briefly quoted, Aiken views skeptically the poetry of such poets as Auden, Tate, Ransom, and Warren. He laments their inability to give their poetry a personal quality, what he calls, as I too have called it in this essay, an "I." A lengthy analysis of their poetry, and especially its defeatism, a quality which he inveighs against in Preludes for Memnon as well, leads him to a strong statement on the nature of English poetry:

> The truth is that a wholehearted romantic revival is much overdue; and it is the poets who must themselves bring it to pass. They must throw the critics and schoolmasters out of the window, neck and crop, and the sociologists as well; and then themselves reestablish poetry where it belongs--not in the margins of a textbook, but as coterminous with our awareness of the world. It is in the nature of English poetry to be romantic,--it has never at its best been anything else,--so let us again have it romantic.[20]

The thesis is certainly arguable, but as Aiken himself noted, the poet writing criticism is very likely to be defending his own species of poetry, and it certainly seems that this statement accurately defines the intention and theme of Preludes for Memnon.

The overpowering feeling that the past is forever dead, and that the only viable human moment exists in the present, and in change itself, is one facet of Romanticism, just as an alternative feeling of nostalgic melancholy at the very passing is another possible facet. Though the term is loose, and of no great descriptive power, Aiken's strong use of the term gives it a validity in speaking of his own poetry that it might lack in other contexts. But Aiken's

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[20]Reviewer's ABC, p. 102.

already briefly quoted, Aiken views specifically the poetry of such poets as Auden, Tate, Ransom, and Warren. He laments their inability to give their poetry a personal quality, what he calls, as I too have called it in this essay, an "I." A lengthy analysis of their poetry, and especially its defection, a quality which he inveighs against in Preludes for Memnon as well, leads him to a strong statement on the nature of English poetry:

> The truth is that a wholehearted romantic revival is much overdue; and it is the poets who must themselves bring it to pass. They must throw the critics and scholiasts out of the window, neck and crop, and the neotologists as well; and then themselves resuscitate poetry where it belongs--not in the margins of a textbook, but as coterminous with our awareness of the world. It is in the nature of English poetry to be romantic,--it has never at its best been anything else,--so let us again have it romantic.[20]

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[20] Bayleaves'A ANC, p. 102.

conclusion in Preludes for Memnon gives his poem a distinctive quality. Though the "I" of the poem has passed through despair because of the transitory nature of the world, he eventually frees himself from this:

> Here is a letter with a cancelled stamp--
> Decipherably dated. Must it weep
> Black tears of ink because it bears our name?
> Or must our calendars abase themselves?
> Shakspere would spit on this: let us spit also . . .
> Good God, we are not come to such weak softness
> That we must beg our very origins
> To bless us from the past. What we remember,
> Why that's ourselves; and if ourselves be honest,
> We'll know this world of straws and leaves and hearts
> Too well to give it power. (p. 570.)

The rootedness which is needed at the center of a man's existence is finally found to be precisely where it is needed--the fact of the world's remorseless change and its ruthless resistance to man's petty blandishments for a weak contentment is faced. The knowledge gained from confronting the world as it is (which is to be crucified by the world) enables man to gain his power over it, and thus become as a god to the world. It is a hard and a bitter concept, one not likely to be popular; it entails the possibility of losing all. But once understood, it entails also the belief that to lose all is a despicable tautology if one has nothing to lose. Perhaps the best way to finish commenting on the themes of Preludes for Memnon is to end with Aiken's own ending to the poem:

> Here is no message of assuagement, blown
> From Ecuador to Greenland; here is only
> A trumpet blast, that calls dead men to arms;
> The granite's pity for the cloud; the whisper
> Of time to space. (p. 573.)

APPENDIX

These four letters from Conrad Aiken represent one of the more interesting and helpful aspects in writing this essay. In each case, these letters were received by me very soon after, almost by return mail, I had written a letter to him. The letters appear to have been hastily typed on a single sheet with no attempt at any neatness not provided by the typewriter which he uses. They are all single-spaced, with minimal margins, and with corrections and afterthoughts added with a pen.

For the sake of clarity, these letters are reproduced here with double spaces between lines. They are otherwise reproduced as I received them except that there is no designation for the end of a page. Clarifying notes are given. The letters are otherwise, I think, eloquently clear to anyone familiar with the Aiken canon. His geniality and frankness are beyond criticism.

Letter One

233 East 33 Street

New York City 16

Murray Hill 4-6699

april 25 60

Dear Mr. Chapin:

Thanks, and how very nice and encouraging! I'm delighted, and will be glad to give you a hand if I can. But when will you be in the East? For it now looks a little as if we'd go to England in July for two months--in the meantime it will be May in NYC and June at Brewster, roughly speaking.

Yes, Melody of Chaos[21] is naturally a somewhat dated and restricted book, and not helped either by a somewhat flamboyant style and a considerable failure on the purely aesthetic level. But there's been really very little. Blackmur rather sidestepped it in his Atlantic piece[22] some years ago, I think possibly with that audience in mind. And a young man at Harvard, Robert Wilbur, now taking his Ph.D, at Columbia, did a thesis at Harvard which was later published in Northwest Review,[23] and very

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[21]Houston Peterson, Melody of Chaos (New York: Longmans, Green, 1931).

[22]R. P. Blackmur, "Conrad Aiken: the Poet," Atlantic Monthly, CXCII (December, 1953), 77-78.

[23]Robert Wilbur, "The Song of Consciousness," Northwest Review (Spring, 1959), pp. 49-54.

Letter One

good, I thought--perhaps you'd like to meet him. Also, Rufus Blanshard (son of Paul) is in theory doing a book on the whole bloody corpus--you may have seen his introduction to the Reviewer's ABC, or his article on my play in Sewanee.[24] He teaches at U of Conn., and if you like you could arrange to talk with him. He has at present a whole lot of my mss (USHANT included) which is earmarked for Harvard but temporarily at his disposal.

Too bad you can't be in NY on May 22nd--the National Arts Club is giving me a kind of 70th birthday party in the form of a dramatic presentation of Osiris Jones and The Kid--ten double actors reading the first and seven the second, one performance in the afternoon, tother in the evening. Fred Stewart, of Actors' Studio, is directing, and it just MIGHT be quite exciting. In any event a brave experiment! Anyway I look forward to it with great curiosity.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Conrad Aiken

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[24]Rufus A. Blanshard, "Metamorphosis of a Dream," Sewanee Review, LXV (1957), 694-702. Aiken's play is Mr. Arcularis.

Letter Two

address till October:8 Watchbell St., Rye, Sussex. Sail july 2nd.

Forty-one Doors

Stony Brook Road

Brewster, Mass.

June 15 60

Dear Mr. Chapin:

Thanks very much for your letter, and very interesting too--you hit sundry nails very accurately on the head--Blackmur's condescension, which however I think was PARTLY due to an attempt to tune himself down to an ATLANTIC pitch (but not wholly), and in general the inadequacy of the textual analysis gambit to the sort of thing I've had in mind and tried to do.[25] The corpus IS cumulative and to some extent calculatedly interlocking; with, as you point out, recurrent themes and symbols: as, for example, the line "Time in the rock and in the human heart", from Memnon, supplies the titles and themes of the two laterx books, so that the trio is in a sense inter dependent, and only gives up its whole meaning when thus regarded. In the same way, Blue Voyage and Ushant are deliberate summings-up, at crucial "moments", of the position behind the work, a confession as to how the wheels go round. Analagous to Apologia Pro Specie Sua in Scepticisms. But that principle or method runs all through it: in the recent books, Hallowe'en, Mayflower, Li Po, The

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[25]This statement was made in response to my adverse comment on the New Critics in general and Blackmur's article in particular.

Crystal, Another Lycidas, and to some extent The Walk in the Garden, are all preoccupied with one's rootedness in time and place and inheritance, along with the problems of language and ITS rootedness in these factors. And, as you say, this is a different kind of poetry from the consciously and packed ambiguous, and doesn't lend itself to that kind of exegesis. In fact, it disappears under it! In short, I think you're on the right track. Wilbur's address is 305 W 98, NYC, UN-4-2400. Don't know if he'll be there now, but I daresay mail will be forwarded. He teaches at Northwestern next fall.

Sincerely,

Conrad Aiken

Letter Three

8 Watchbell Street, Rye, Sussex

Aug 3 60

Dear Mr. Chapin:

Many thanks for a very good letter, and embarrassingly searching. You manage to analyze me at "joints" in the old corpus which I would not have myself perceived, and and then synthesize it again into a shape which I may or may not have conceived at the time--fascinating, but leaves me now and then wondering, lawks a mercy on me can this be I?? You know the feeling. But yes, I do think the passages you quote from Memnon are among the ones that meant most to me, and for that matter still do, as I've just now been discovering in the very difficult process of making a "choice"--from Coll. Poems, Skylight One, and Li Po--for a "selected" poems to be published next year. Perhaps a general idea of my choice would illustrate this --I found myself compelled to leave out almost in toto the shorter and more lyrical or decorative things in order to point up the growing preoccupation with self-awareness and self-searchingness as the imperative groundwork for any in the least trustworthy approach to either attitude or definition. Thus I open with Palimpsest: the Deceitful Portrait (the long section in H of Dust which begins, "Well, as you say, we live for small horizons") which really sets the key, and go on with Senlin (entire, if they'll give me room, but I fear they won't, and in the interests of later work I'd sacrifice it), then Psychomachia, Samadhi, Exile, Road, Room, and that whole group of cranky blank verse things which, with Changing Mind, constituted the

move from the absolute music you mention to an absolute of a more fundamental kind. The only break is an otherwise pretty strict chronological order is in putting Osiris Jones next, ahead of the two groups of preludes--this at the suggestion of a young friend of mine, Jay Martin, who has just done a Ph D treatise on it all: he very sensibly pointed out that this would dramatize and introduce the preludes, and also allow them to stand together, as they should, for they really constitude one poem. I've put in about half of the preludes, making them the core of the book. After them, Landscape West of Eden (another dramatization of the same preoccupations and relativities) Blues for Ruby Matrix, The Kid, Mayflower, Hallowe'en, Li Po, Another Lycidas, and The Crystal. The weighting of the book will be at once evident. No Human Heart or Brownstone nor Priapus, though Human Heart IS of course tied to the preludes in more than title. But in my limits of 280 pages it seemed to me that this batch WOULD, as it were, "state the case", and, I very much hope, lead to a revised estimate of the nature of the whole "essay". Or will it only prove to be damned dull? We'll have to wait and see!--And yes, I did weight those questions you raise, when, as you put it, I sat out the war: I was concerned with what I was concerned with: if the war got me before I could get on with it, so much for that, but I hoped it wouldn't, and was glad it didn't. As for Milton, and the 11 syllable line, well, I'm sure Milton greatly influenced me, and last week when for the first time in years I read some quotations from P.L.* by Empson, I was at once (this before your letter came) struck by a kind of submerged kinship: we had been speaking the same language. And the 11 syllable line, or

Jacobean, perhaps/ I was quite conscious of experimenting with this as I moved into the preludes from Changing Mind and those others of the mid-twenties and after. John Deth--I tried to rewrite it in irregular rhyming free-verse, but it had gone cold, was worse than the original version, which I agree is not a satisfactory poem, and, as you say, largely because of the form--I like the bird section. But on the other hand, the octosyllabic (but of course with hill billy and ballad liberties taken) DOES, I think, though many don't agree with me, work in The Kid. The theme of the dance of death had preoccupied me for many years, I'd tried it at various times, and always I think in this meter, aiming at a kind of "jig", a la Holbein, with a calculated gaucherie, so perhaps there was too much hold-over of this image, and the poem suffers from it: it becomes monotonous. But to go back to the preludes, the aim here <u>was</u> freedom from the strict iambic, and for a colloquial-plus-scientific-plus-slang-plus-anything freedom to put in "the works". Obviously you saw this. . . .I envy you Mexico, but we're enjoying Rye, and it was fun selecting the preludes in this house, from the back of which I can see Jeake's House, in which most of them were written! A long short circuit, thirty-odd years. Tiens.

Very best

Conrad Aiken

* from Paradise Lost--

Letter Four

Forty-one Doors

Stony Brook Road

Brewster, Mass.

dec 12 60

Dear Mr. Chapin:

Very glad to hear from you again, and that the thesis advances itself at last to the writing stage, and with a final concentration of its View. The latter excellent, I think, though I can't help wondering whether Landscape West of Eden shouldn't be there? Like old O Jones it sort of belongs with the two escaliers of preludes--in a way, more than Human Heart, thematically; though of course Human Heart was a deliberate part of the plan. (Time in the rock, and in the human heart--cf Memnon.) And yes, I know about the chronology; in fact, didn't I mention the necessary violation of it in the prefacek to COLL. POEMS? It was the necessity of grouping the symphonies that fouled it all up. In the SELECTED POEMS (next spring) it's straightforward except for old Jones again, which of course OUGHT to come after Memnon--though written partly at the same time; but "works" better as a kind of introduction to the two series of preludes and Landscape. Otherwise, it's all as correct as my memory can make it. May be a few small slips. And yes, fine if you could do yet another thing on the SEl. POEMS, which, as I think I told you, calculatedly and heavily emphasizes the philosophical and psychological concern, at the expense of the lyrical and decorative--

Letter Four

a sneaky attempt to alter the public image, god help us all!--Thanks for the fascinating Kachina Dolls. I haven't read Wilson,[26] but had heard of it--he's a good historian and reporter, erudite, and writes PRETTY well, but also a classic case of a critic without natural taste. His taste in poetry is lamentable, and I've told him so! I'm very fond of him....Delighted to hear of your marriage and the two new daughters--what a nice wedding-present to get. You're to be envied. We miss our redheaded grand-daughters, whom we saw a great deal of in Rye this past summer--they too are enchanting.

Best as ever

Conrad Aiken

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[26] Edmund Wilson.

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