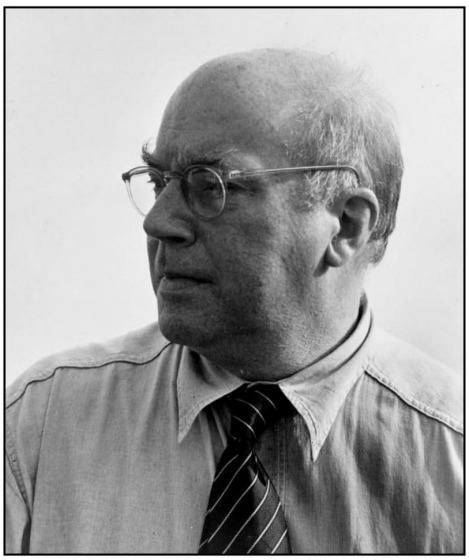
Cosmos Mariner

The poet Conrad Aiken was born in 1889 in Savannah, Georgia. When Aiken was 11 years old, his father, a respected surgeon, shot his wife and then committed suicide. Trying to distance himself from the experience in the third person, Conrad later recounted his discovery of the bodies:

> [A]fter the desultory early morning quarrel, came the half stifled scream, and then the sound of his father's voice counting three, and the two loud pistol-shots; and he had tiptoed into the dark room, where the two bodies lay motionless and apart, and, finding them dead, found himself possessed of them forever. (Aiken, 1952, p 302).

Aiken was taken into the care of his aunt, Jane Delano Kempton, in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and later lived with an uncle, William Tillinghast, a college librarian at Harvard. After graduating from Middlesex Preparatory School in Concord, Aiken was admitted to Harvard University in 1907, where he became a friend of T. S. Eliot.



After leaving Harvard in 1912, Aiken decided to devote his life to poetry. Though much more prolific than Eliot, Aiken never achieved his colleague's popularity. Many of Aiken's poems are long and discursive. They might perhaps have benefited from an editor like Ezra Pound, who was so effective in separating out the gold in Eliot's verse (Eliot, 1922/1971). Aiken published more than 30 volumes of poetry, several novels, many short stories and two autobiographical memoirs. Despite receiving the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, and serving as the Consultant in Poetry for the

Library of Congress, Aiken became “one of the country’s best-known and least-read poets and men of letters” (Butscher, 1988, p xvii).

Aiken was a frequent reviewer for newspapers and literary magazines, providing critical evaluations of the new modernist poets. He even anonymously reviewed himself:

> It is difficult to place Conrad Aiken in the poetic firmament, so difficult that one sometimes wonders whether he deserves a place there at all … The musical symbolism, almost obsessionally pursued, develops a melodic line only to be broken in upon by a matter-of-factness which in the context appears only malicious. It is questionable whether this sort of counterpoint of ideas can ever be successful in verse. The unity of effect is jeopardized; the reader is more often perplexed than pleased.” (Aiken, 1958, pp 120-121, quotation is from a review, correctly entitled *Schisophrenia*, initially published in 1917 in the *Chicago News*).

After spending some time in England, Aiken returned to North America, settling in Brewster in an old Cape Cod farmhouse near Sheepfold Hill. The hill played a prominent role in the poem *A Letter from Li Po* and became the title of Aiken’s subsequent book of poetry). Aiken’s home was described by Wilbur when he visited Aiken for an interview:

> The house, called Forty-one Doors, dates largely from the eighteenth century; a typical old Cape Cod farmhouse, the rooms are small but many, opening in all directions off what must originally have been the most important room, the kitchen. The house is far enough from the center of town to be reasonably quiet even at the height of the summer, and it is close enough to the north Cape shore for easy trips to watch the gulls along the edges of relatively unspoiled inlets. (Wilbur, 1968).

In 1962 Aiken finally returned to Savannah, where he lived next door to his parents' former house. He died there in 1973. His gravestone is a bench beside his parents' grave. His epitaph reads "Cosmos Mariner Destination Unknown. Give my Love to the World."

Aiken was deeply influenced at Harvard by George Santayana (1863-1952), finding inspiration in his books *The Sense of Beauty* (1896) and *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900). He took Santayana's advanced course on the philosopher-poets (Lucretius, Dante and Goethe), lectures that Santayana would later publish as *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910).

Aiken also became fascinated by Freud's analysis of the unconscious and interpretation of dreams. He read reports of Freud's 1909 lectures at Clark University and, despite only having rudimentary German, attempted to understand some of Freud's books. His autobiographical works *Great Circle* (1933) and *Ushant* (1952) are works of intense personal psychoanalysis. Freud, himself, admired *Great Circle* and kept a copy of it on his desk (Wilbur, 1968).

Another major influence on Aiken's life and thinking was his maternal grandfather William James Potter (1829-1893), a Unitarian minister and one of the founders of the Free Religious Association. Aiken only met him once when he was four years old, but the kindly old man made a lasting impression. In his memory, their afternoon together became a laying on of hands:

> thee must now and hereafter do *my* thinking for *me*, thee must be the continuance of me, thee will forever, even if intermittently, or only if every so often c*onsciously*, stand in the ghost of a pulpit, in the ghost of a church, in the ghost of our beloved New Bedford (Aiken, 1952, p 112).

Aiken kept the two books of Potter's sermons always with him,

and many of their themes recur in his poetry. One of the posthumously published lectures concerned

> Religion as the affirmation of God in human nature; religion as the proclamation of the veritable incarnation of the Eternal Power, with its attributes of intelligence and moral purpose in the human faculties, not by supernatural, exceptional inspiration, but naturally and inherently there in the very substance, fibre, and organism of the faculties themselves; religion as the organized presence, power, and life of God in the human soul. (Potter, 1895, pp 177-178)

Aiken continued his grandfather's thinking. He became a poet of the human consciousness, attempting to put into words the divinity evolving within the human mind.

This post will comment briefly on Aiken's poem *A Letter from Li Po* (1952). The poem is in 12 sections and takes up 21 pages. I shall consider only the first two sections; any more would exceed the reasonable limits for a post. The complete poem is available at Poemhunter and on the Dutch LiPo website (together with some Chinese paintings). I am also much indebted to Ian Kluge for his insightful evaluation of the poem – *At Home in Exile: "The Liquid I"* – though this remains unpublished. Other evaluations are listed in at the end of the post. The recordings of Aiken reading the poem are from 1955. They are taken from a vinyl recording now long out of print.

A Letter from Li Po was written in Cape Cod. The opening lines describe the clarity of an autumn afternoon in New England before shifting to the China of Li Po (Li Bai in pinyin romanization), one of the Immortals of the Wine Cup. Aiken is invoking his predecessor, trying to understand the process of poetry as it was then and as it is now: the spelling down of meaning on the page, or as he says later in the poem (Section V) transforming "all things to a hoop of flame where through tigers of meaning leap:"

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Fanfare of northwest wind, a bluejay wind
announces autumn, and the Equinox
rolls back blue bays to a far afternoon.
Somewhere beyond the Gorge Li Po is gone,
looking for friendship or an old love’s sleeve
or writing letters to his children, lost,
and to his children’s children, and to us.
What was his light? of lamp or moon or sun?
Say that it changed, for better or for worse,
sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk
a slant of witch-light; on the pure text
a slant of genius; emptying mind and heart
for winecups and more winecups and more words.
What was his time? Say that it was a change,
but constant as a changing thing may be,
from chicory’s moon-dark blue down the taut scale
to chicory’s tenderest pink, in a pink field
such as imagination dreams of thought.
But of the heart beneath the winecup moon
the tears that fell beneath the winecup moon
for children lost, lost lovers, and lost friends,
what can we say but that it never ends?
Even for us it never ends, only begins.
Yet to spell down the poem on her page,
margining her phrases, parsing forth
the sevenfold prism of meaning, up the scale
from chicory pink to blue, is to assume
Li Po himself: as he before assumed
the poets and the sages who were his.
Like him, we too have eaten of the word:
with him are somewhere lost beyond the Gorge:
and write, in rain, a letter to lost children,
a letter long as time and brief as love.

Aiken was a master of sounds. Alliterations such as “back blue bays” and “sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk” are entrancing. The repetition of “beneath the winecup moon” sounds like an incantation. The multiple l-sounds last two lines of this section brings to mind the liquid noise of falling rain.

Aiken is very precise in his imagery. In the first line he mentions a “bluejay wind.” Bluejays do not always migrate, but they often move southward along the Atlantic seaboard in the fall. Sometimes there are flocks of a hundred or more. They appear as if the northwest wind had just blown them down from Canada.

Aiken’s description of the petals of the chicory flower changing from “moon-dark blue” to “tenderest pink” made me aware of colors that I had not previously noticed.

As shown in the illustration on the right, the central origin of the blue petals can be a very light pink.

Aiken was a philosophical poet and his poetry is very concerned with ideas. In this first section he asks about the inspiration of Li Po: “What was his light?” His focuses on the idea that everything changes: “Say that it changed.” The poet, be he Li Po or Conrad Aiken, must somehow determine what is

constant in this continual flux. Kluge suggests that the poem

> crystallizes his beliefs about the individual's beliefs in a Heraclitean universe in which relentless change constantly subverts our sense of identity.

Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic Greek philosophers whose writings survive only in fragments quoted by others. His philosophy revolved about the idea of change. Nothing is ever the same: "one cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you first stepped has flowed on" (translation by Davenport, 1995, p. 160). Another fragment is much in keeping with the view of consciousness proposed by Aiken and his grandfather: "No matter how many ways you try, you cannot find a boundary to consciousness, so deep in every direction does it extend" (p 162)

How do we deal with this continual change? Poetry is one way. Aiken characterizes the poet as one who has "eaten of the word." The allusion is primarily to the Christian Eucharist wherein the wafer and the wine are taken by the communicant to represent the body and blood of Christ, who called himself the Word. But the word of Aiken's poem is actual word as well as philosophical *logos.* The poet experiences the joy of using words to make thoughts more memorable and meaningful. This is the experience of Mark Strand in his poem *Eating Poetry* (1969, p. 3)

> Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
> There is no happiness like mine.
> I have been eating poetry.

In Aiken's poem, the words come from the exiled Li Po. Late in his life he was banished from the court and made his way toward western China (Waley, 1950). Beyond the gorges of the Yangtze River was a land without the sophisticated pleasures of the court, dotted with occasional temples for meditation and inns for drinking. It was a place for solitude. Li Po

remembers his family but realizes his intense loneliness. The second section of the poem considers the state of the individual consciousness:

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> And yet not love, not only love. Not caritas
> or only that. Nor the pink chicory love,
> deep as it may be, even to moon-dark blue,
> in which the dragon of his meaning flew
> for friends or children lost, or even
> for the beloved horse, for Li Po's horse:
> not these, in the self's circle so embraced:
> too near, too dear, for pure assessment: no,
> a letter crammed and creviced, crannied full,
> storied and stored as the ripe honeycomb
> with other faith than this. As of sole pride
> and holy loneliness, the intrinsic face
> worn by the always changing shape between
> end and beginning, birth and death.
> How moves that line of daring on the map?
> Where was it yesterday, or where this morning
> when thunder struck at seven, and in the bay
> the meteor made its dive, and shed its wings,
> and with them one more Icarus? Where struck
> that lightning-stroke which in your sleep you saw
> wrinkling across the eyelid? Somewhere else?
> But somewhere else is always here and now.
> Each moment crawls that lightning on your eyelid:
> each moment you must die. It was a tree
> that this time died for you: it was a rock
> and with it all its local web of love:
> a chimney, spilling down historic bricks:
> perhaps a skyful of Ben Franklin's kites.
> And with them, us. For we must hear and bear
> the news from everywhere: the hourly news,

infinitesimal or vast, from everywhere.

Occasional end-rhymes occur in this section: “blue” and “flew,” “bear” and “everywhere.” The alliteration persists: “a letter crammed and creviced, crannied full.” Sometimes Aiken juxtaposes words with similar sounds but different meanings: “storied and stored as the ripe honeycomb.” Dickey (1968, p. 61) calls these effects “verbal jugglery.” Bringing ideas together on the basis of how words sound is an indirect way to force meaning. In this case it works: the letter from Li Po contains the stories that have been stored up in his poems.

Li Po’s horse is a reference to a story that the Emperor had rewarded the poet with one of his finest horses (Waley, 1950, p. 63). With his banishment. Li Po had been deprived of family, court and horse. He was left with only consciousness and poetry.

His state was one of “sole pride and holy loneliness.” Despite the love of others, experience ultimately comes down to the individual consciousness, which must make sense of an ever-changing, ever-dying world. Aiken characterizes this process using an image from the war – the lines upon a map marking the advances of an army: “How moves that line of daring on the map?”

Though limited to one person’s mind, the human consciousness can partake of all things – “the news from everywhere.” We are part and parcel of everything we have experienced.

I have commented briefly on only the first two sections of the poem. Later sections tell us further stories of Li Po and his poems. Comparisons are made to Aiken’s experience in Cape Cod. The last section takes place in the South Yarmouth Quaker

Graveyard where one of Aiken's
ancestors, Cousin Abiel Akin (in the old spelling) is buried. Abiel saw the same stars as Li Po described in his poems many years before. Human consciousness continues even though the individual dies. The poem concludes with the idea that the creative consciousness can understand the changes we experience and overcome the idea of death. From the graveyard Aiken writes

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> In this small mute democracy of stones
> is it Abiel or Li Po who lies
> and lends us against death our speech?
> They are the same, and it is both who teach.
> The poets and the prophecies are ours:
> and these are with us as we turn, in turn,
> the leaves of love that fill the Book of Change.

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