# THE ART OF POETRY NO. 9
# CONRAD AIKEN

The interview took place in two sessions of about an hour each in September 1963, at Mr. Aiken's house in Brewster, Massachusetts. 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.

Mr. Aiken dresses typically in a tweed sports coat, a wool or denim shirt, and a heavy wool tie. A fringe of sparse white hair gives him a curiously friarly appearance, belied by his irreverence and love of bawdy puns.

He answered the questions about his own work seriously and carefully but did not appear to enjoy them; not that he seemed to find them too pressing or impertinent, rather as if answering them was simply hard work. He enjoyed far more telling anecdotes about himself and his friends and chuckled frequently in recalling these stories.

By the end of each hour Mr. Aiken, who had been seriously ill the previous winter, was visibly tired; but once the tape recorder was stilled and the martinis mixed and poured into silver cups—old sculling or tennis trophies retrieved from some pawn or antique shop—he quickly revived. He was glad to be interviewed, but more glad still when it was over.

Later, shortly before the interview went to press, a dozen or so follow-up questions were sent to him at the Cape; the answers to these are spliced into the original interview. "You may find you will need to do a bit of dovetailing here and there," he wrote; "the old *mens* isn't quite, may never be, as *sana* as before, if indeed it ever was." But there was no real problem; his mind and memory remain clear and precise despite the physical frailties that age has brought.

*—Robert Hunter Wilbur, 1968*

INTERVIEWER

In *Ushant* you say that you decided to be a poet when you were very young—about six years old, I think.

CONRAD AIKEN

Later than that. I think it was around nine.

INTERVIEWER

I was wondering how this resolve to be a poet grew and strengthened?

AIKEN

Well, I think *Ushant* describes it pretty well, with that epigraph from *Tom Brown's School Days*: "I'm the poet of White Horse Vale, sir, with Liberal notions under my cap!" For some

reason those lines stuck in my head, and I've never forgotten them. This image became something I *had* to be.

INTERVIEWER

While you were at Harvard, were you constantly aware that you were going to be a poet; training yourself in most everything you studied and did?

AIKEN

Yes. I compelled myself all through to write an exercise in verse, in a different form, every day of the year. I turned out my page every day, of some sort—I mean I didn't give a damn about the meaning, I just wanted to master the form—all the way from free verse, Walt Whitman, to the most elaborate of villanelles and ballad forms. Very good training. I've always told everybody who has ever come to me that I thought that was the first thing to do. And to study all the vowel effects and all the consonant effects and the variation in vowel sounds. For example, I gave Malcolm Lowry an exercise to do at Cuernavaca, of writing ten lines of blank verse with the caesura changing one step in each line. Going forward, you see, and then reversing on itself.

INTERVIEWER

How did Lowry take to these exercises?

AIKEN

Superbly. I still have a group of them sent to me at his rented house in Cuernavaca, sent to me by hand from the bar with a request for money, and in the form of a letter—and unfortunately not used in his collected letters; very fine, and very funny. As an example of his attention to vowel sounds, one line still haunts me: "Airplane or aeroplane, or just plain plane." Couldn't be better.

INTERVIEWER

What early readings were important to you? I gather that Poe was.

AIKEN

Oh, Poe, yes. I was reading Poe when I was in Savannah, when I was ten, and scaring myself to death. Scaring my brothers and sisters to death, too. So I was already soaked in him, especially the stories.

INTERVIEWER

I see you listed occasionally as a Southern writer. Does this make any sense to you?

AIKEN

Not at all. I'm not in the least Southern; I'm entirely New England. Of course, the Savannah *ambiente* made a profound impression on me. It was a beautiful city and so wholly different from New England that going from South to North every year, as we did in the summers, provided an extraordinary counterpoint of experience, of sensuous adventure. The change was so violent, from Savannah to New Bedford or Savannah to Cambridge, that it was extraordinarily useful. But no, I never was connected with any of the Southern writers.

INTERVIEWER

In what way was the change from Savannah to New England "useful" to you?

AIKEN

Shock treatment, I suppose: the milieu so wholly different, and the social customs, and the mere *transplantation*; as well as having to change one's accent twice a year—all this quite apart from the astonishing change of landscape. From swamps and Spanish moss to New England *rocks*.

INTERVIEWER

What else at Harvard was important to your development as a poet, besides the daily practice you described?

AIKEN

I'm afraid I wasn't much of a student, but my casual reading was enormous. I did have some admirable courses, especially two years of English 5 with Dean Briggs, who was a great teacher, I think, and that was the best composition course I ever had anywhere.

INTERVIEWER

How did Briggs go about teaching writing?

AIKEN

He simply let us write, more or less, what we wanted to. Then discussion (after his reading aloud of a chosen specimen) and his own marvelous comments: He had genius, and emanated it. Then, at the end of class, we had ten minutes in which to write a short critique of the piece that had been read. This was so helpful to *me* that I took the course for two years.

INTERVIEWER

Was Copeland still teaching then? What did you think of him?

AIKEN

Brilliant reader, not a profound teacher. Vain. At the end of the year he asked me, Aiken, do you think this course has benefited you? I was taken aback and replied, Well, it has made me write often. He replied, Aiken, you're a very *dry* young man.

INTERVIEWER

T. S. Eliot mentioned in an interview with *The Paris Review* that while he was reading French poetry at Harvard, you were reading Italian and Spanish poets.

AIKEN

Yes, I had begun to read Spanish poetry, come to think of it, and Italian, that's true. I'd begun reading Leopardi in 1911, and the French poets I didn't get around to until senior year at Harvard when I discovered Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* and swallowed that in one gulp.

INTERVIEWER

None of these foreign readings had anything like the same effect on your work that Eliot's reading of the French symbolists had on his, did they?

AIKEN

I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER

You kept rather to the English Romantic tradition—

AIKEN

Yes, and Whitman had a profound influence on me. That was during my sophomore year when I came down with a bad attack of Whitmanitis. But he did me a lot of good, and I think the influence is discoverable.

INTERVIEWER

What was the good he did? Mainly enabling you to get away from Victorian forms?

AIKEN

General loosening up, yes. He was useful to me in the perfection of form, as a sort of compromise between the strict and the free.

INTERVIEWER

Was William James still at Harvard when you were there?

AIKEN

No, he retired the year I got there, or the year before, but was still around, and you felt his presence very much. But Santayana was the real excitement for me at Harvard, especially *Three Philosophical Poets,* which he was inventing that year as he went along—so we were getting the thing right off the fire.

INTERVIEWER

Santayana's insistence that philosophical content—the "vision" of philosophy—is one of the things that can give the greatest effect to poetry—this, I gather, impressed you quite highly at the time?

AIKEN

Oh, much. Tremendously. It really fixed my view of what poetry should ultimately be.

INTERVIEWER

That it was greatest if it thought most deeply?

AIKEN

That it really had to begin by *understanding*, or trying to understand.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know Eliot quite well at Harvard?

AIKEN

Eliot and I must have met at the end of my freshman year, when I was elected to the *Harvard Advocate*. We saw a great deal of each other, in spite of the fact that we were a year apart, and remained very close.

INTERVIEWER

Was your conversation largely about poetry, or did you share other interests and activities?

AIKEN

Of course, at the beginning, on the *Advocate*, we talked chiefly about poetry, or literature in general. But as the friendship, or kinship, developed—for in a way I became his younger brother—it widened to take in everything. And we met on very, very many quite frivolous occasions. Sports, comics, everything. We developed a shorthand language of our own which we fell into for the rest of our lives whenever we met, no holds barred—all a matter of past reference, a common language, but basically *affection*, along with humor, and appreciation of each other's minds, and of Krazy Kat. Faced with England, and the New World, and Freud and all, we always managed to *relax*, and go back to the kidding, and bad punning, and drinking, to the end. It really was marvelous.

INTERVIEWER

Did you see Eliot much after the war brought you back to the States?

AIKEN

Only when he paid his infrequent visits here, when we invariably met to get drunk together. There was a splendid occasion when he and I and our wives dined at "The Greeks'" after he'd received a silver bowl from the Signet Society; he was wearing a cowboy hat, and we all got plastered. We went on to the Red Lion Grill, after many drinks at the Silver Dollar Bar, the two toughest and *queerest* joints in Boston. He couldn't walk, for his ankles were crossed, so Valerie *lifted* him into the taxi.

INTERVIEWER

Did Eliot's early work—such as "Prufrock"—help you in developing your own style?

by these translated
and made an ecstasy.
Thus in our transient and translunar love
translate the love to you and me.
Now that is gone,
and love undone.

He

I invoke, then, a particular day. The clock strikes one.
Now the ~~first~~ snowflake ~~floats upon~~ the stone
and perishes ~~[illegible]~~. Our eyes are filled
with immortal light, clear ~~recognition~~, clear knowledge
of all that's past and to come:
yes, those histories and prophecies you speak of, the secret
tangents of sense thrust against sense
but only to illumine: the I and You.
opposed in a compelled counterpoint
which willy nilly joins them. Of all this
what shall we remember? Simply, the first snowflake falling:
while, from the distance of a breath, for the first time,
I observe the ~~pale and de~~licate shape of a closed eyelid
closed on the vulnerable secret o~~f the flower~~
(yourself the ~~flower~~) ______ Secret
and yet inviolable as death.

She

Yes. Remember ~~that.~~
And I too will ~~remember~~ ~~something~~.
When my eyes opened, your hand was holding the umbrella
and the green transparent shadow changed your face.
These shall be time and place.

He

And now, since there's no help, without a kiss we'll part.

She

Each with a separate but remembering heart.

Early draft of the concluding lines of "Love's Grammarians"

AIKEN

Oh, "Prufrock" had a tremendous influence on me. You can see it all through the verse symphonies.

INTERVIEWER

The use of the interior monologue in particular?

AIKEN

I don't know whether that came from him. In fact, the whole complex of our relationship is a very subtle thing. I think there was a lot of interchange. For example, I did for English 5 in my extra year at Harvard—the fall of 1911—a poem called *The Clerk's Journal,* which was about the life of a little stool-sitting clerk in a bank and his mundane affairs, his little love affair, his worry about clothes . . . and telephone wires in the moonlight. This was three years before "Prufrock."

INTERVIEWER

Do you still have this poem?

AIKEN

Yes, I've still got it, with Briggs's comment on the back of it. This was an anticipation. In other words, I was thinking in this direction before "Prufrock," and I have no doubt that Tom saw this poem, *The Clerk's Journal*. The juices went both ways.

INTERVIEWER

There's a lot of what we now think of as "*The Waste Land* attitude" in your verse symphonies, isn't there? In *Forslin* and *The House of Dust*, which came well before *The Waste Land*?

AIKEN

Yes, there's a lot in *The Waste Land* that owes something, I think, to *The House of Dust* and *Forslin*.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever see *The Waste Land* in manuscript?

AIKEN

No, I never did. Not as a whole. But I had seen whole sections which prior to *The Waste Land* existed as separate small poems, I believe not then intended for any other purpose, which were later conglomerated into *The Waste Land*.

INTERVIEWER

How did Pound come across "Prufrock"? Did you take it to him, or did Eliot do that after he came to England himself?

AIKEN

In 1914 I persuaded Tom to let me take "Prufrock" to England; he wasn't at all sure of it. I tried it everywhere—not even Harold Monro of the famous Poetry Bookshop could see it, thought it crazy; many years later he said it was the "Kubla Khan" of the twentieth century. Then I met Pound, showed it to him, and he was at once bowled over. He sent it to *Poetry*. So, when Tom had to retreat from Germany, when the war started, one of his first moves was to go and see Ezra.

Of course, Tom insisted all his life that I had made him cut a whole page or more out of "Prufrock." I don't remember this, but he claimed it was so—that there was a page or something like that that I thought didn't belong, so he took it out. It may be true, or he may have been confusing it with the major operation that Ezra performed on *The Waste Land*. I'm sorry about it, if so, because there's thirty lines lost!

INTERVIEWER

You knew Maxwell Bodenheim, didn't you? [*A new paperback copy of Bodenheim's* My Life and Loves in Greenwich Village *was on the coffee table.*]

AIKEN

Oh, very well. He was a great friend of mine. He used to catch me now and then, touring the country. I don't know how he managed it, but periodically he'd show up in Boston on his way to or from Chicago or New York. He was quite a fascinating creature. He really was a *dedicated* bum and poet.

INTERVIEWER

Did he have an effect on other poets that we've lost sight of?

AIKEN

Yes, I think so. He was a fascinating talker, in spite of the stammer, and he knew everybody. He was a great friend of Bill Williams. You must have heard the story of his broken arm? He called up Williams at Rutherford and said, I've broken my arm. Can I come and stay with you till it heals? Bill said, Certainly. About a month or two went by, and Max did nothing about having the cast examined or changed, so finally Bill insisted on looking at it and discovered that there had never been any broken arm.

INTERVIEWER

Did you see a good bit of Pound in the early days?

AIKEN

I saw a lot of him for about six weeks in 1914 in London. I had a letter of introduction to him from Herman Hagedorn, who, it turned out, really didn't know Pound at all. But Pound was extraordinarily kind to me and really took pains to take me around and introduce me to people and to publishers, not always with luck.

INTERVIEWER

Was he any help to you in your own work?

AIKEN

Not a bit. We agreed to disagree about that right off, and I felt right off, too, that he was not for me, that he would become the old man of the sea and be on my shoulders in no time—which is exactly the experience that Williams had with him. I remember Williams describing how when he walked with Pound in London, Pound was always one step ahead. This gradually annoyed Williams to death, so he made a point of being right beside Pound. Very typical that—tells a lot, I think.

INTERVIEWER

How about John Gould Fletcher? You worked with him, were very close to him, in Boston and Cambridge, weren't you?

AIKEN

Yes, just after the war began, about 1915, he came back to Boston, and we lived next door to each other for three years. I saw a great deal of him, and we swapped notes and whatnot; and agreed to disagree about many things because he was more involved in imagism or "Amy" gism than I proposed to be. But I think he had great talent which didn't quite come off somehow.

INTERVIEWER

He's practically unread now.

AIKEN

I know. He wrote me a tragic letter in 1949, I think it was, saying, You know, Aiken, we are forgotten. We might as well face it. This was only a year or two before he jumped into the lake.

INTERVIEWER

Did Fletcher's organization of material, the sort of thing he was experimenting with in the color symphonies, bear any relation to the work you were doing with music in your verse symphonies?

AIKEN

I don't know. I don't think we influenced each other, but we were interested in the same sort of thing, in a very different way, of course. He was going for this abstract color business and, I think, with more French influence behind him than I had.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first meet Malcolm Lowry?

AIKEN

In 1929. He came to Cambridge to work with me one summer on *Ultramarine*.

INTERVIEWER

How old was he then?

AIKEN

Barely nineteen, I think. He went back to matriculate at Cambridge that autumn.

INTERVIEWER

Later you moved back to England yourself?

AIKEN

Yes, the next year. Then it was that his father turned him over to me in loco parentis.

INTERVIEWER

To keep him out of trouble or to teach him poetry?

AIKEN

To take care of him and to work with him. So he spent all his holidays with us in Rye or went with us if we went abroad. During his years at Cambridge, he was with me constantly.

INTERVIEWER

What was he working on at this time?

AIKEN

He was finishing *Ultramarine*. I've still got about a third of one version of *Ultramarine*. An interesting specimen of his deliberate attempt to absorb me came to light because there was a page recounting the dream of eating the father's skeleton which comes into my own novel, *Great Circle*. He was going to put this in his book and it didn't seem to matter at all that *I'd* had the dream and written it out.

INTERVIEWER

He doesn't put that in the final version?

AIKEN

No. I said, No, Malcolm, this is carrying it *too* far.

INTERVIEWER

What about *Under the Volcano*? Did you work with him on that also?

AIKEN

No. The first version was already finished when I arrived in Mexico in 1937. He'd been there two or three years. The extraordinary thing is that it was not published for another ten years, during which time he was constantly revising and rewriting. He changed the end, I think entirely, from the version I saw. But the book was already finished and so was another novel called *In Ballast to the White Sea*, which was lost. I think it was in his shack that burnt down at Dollarton, near Vancouver.

That was a remarkable thing, too, although very derivative. You could swim from one influence to another as you went from chapter to chapter. Kafka and Dostoyevsky and God knows what all. But it was a brilliant thing, had some wonderful stuff in it,

including, I remember, a description of a drunken steamboat ride up the Manchester Canal from Liverpool to Manchester.

INTERVIEWER

He lived through a lot that he was able to use very effectively.

AIKEN

Oh, he didn't miss a trick. He was a born observer.

INTERVIEWER

Was Lowry a disciplined writer? His life seems to have been so undisciplined.

AIKEN

Yes, when it came to writing, Malcolm was as obsessed with style as any Flaubert and read enormously to *feed* himself. As I mentioned, he wrote and rewrote *Volcano* for ten years. He once chided me for not taking more pains to "decorate the page."

INTERVIEWER

Do you think writers—fiction writers, particularly—should try deliberately to get out and live through the sort of thing he did? Search for experience? I doubt if he did it quite so consciously, but he lived a very active and varied life.

AIKEN

No, I don't think that was the intention, or not wholly the intention in his case. He really had a yen for the sea. And he came by it naturally; I think his mother's father had something to do with the sea. Of course, that's how we met, through his reading *Blue Voyage*. And he always assumed that in some mystic way the fact I had dedicated *Blue Voyage* to C. M. L. was a dedication to him. Those are his initials. Actually these were the initials of my second wife. But he always thought this was the finger pointing.

The very first night he arrived in Hampton Hall, on Plympton Street where I was living, next door to the Crimson Building, he and I and my youngest brother Robert had a sort of impromptu wrestling match. In the course of this I suggested we use the lid of the WC tank and each take hold of one end of it and wrestle for possession of this thing. So I got it all right; I got it away from Malcolm but fell right over backward into the fireplace and went out like a light; and when I came to, all I could see was red. I was stripped to the waist and lying in bed by myself. They'd disappeared, of course—we'd been imbibing a little bit—and I galloped down the hall to the elevator not knowing what to do. I thought I'd better get a doctor because blood was pouring down my face. It turned out I had a fracture of the skull, and I was in bed for the next two or three weeks. Malcolm would sometimes remember to bring me a bottle of milk, and sometimes not. And during all this we were working on *Ultramarine*. That was the day's work, always.

INTERVIEWER

To turn to your own work—and the prototypical *Paris Review* question: How do you write? You've told me before that you compose on the typewriter.

AIKEN

Yes, ever since the early twenties. I began by doing book reviews on the typewriter and then went over to short stories on the machine, meanwhile sticking to pencil for poetry.

INTERVIEWER

So your verse symphonies were all written in longhand?

AIKEN

They were all written in little exercise books, with pencil.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing poetry on the typewriter?

AIKEN

About the middle of the twenties, I think. It was largely in the interests of legibility because my handwriting was extremely small and not very distinct, and the pencil *faded*. And so this was a great advantage and saved me the pains of copying because in many instances the short stories in *Bring! Bring*! were sent out exactly as written. They were composed straight off my head. I didn't change anything. It's a great laborsaving device—with some risks, because if you lost a copy in the mails it was gone!

INTERVIEWER

You didn't make carbons?

AIKEN

I never used a carbon because that made me self-conscious. I can remember discussing the effect of the typewriter on our work with Tom Eliot because he was moving to the typewriter about the same time I was. And I remember our agreeing that it made for a slight change of style in the prose—that you tended to use more periodic sentences, a little shorter, and a rather choppier style—and that one must be careful about that. Because, you see, you couldn't look ahead quite far enough, for you were always thinking about putting your fingers on the bloody keys. But that was a passing phase only. We both soon discovered that we were just as free to let the style throw itself into the air as we had been writing manually.

INTERVIEWER

Did writing on the typewriter have any comparable effect on the style of the poetry?

AIKEN

I think it went along with my tendency to compress the poetry that began about the mid-twenties, '23 or '24, thereabouts. But revision was always done manually. I preferred yellow paper

because it's not so responsible looking, and I would just let fly and then put the thing away after it was written and not look at it until the next day. Then go to work on it with a pencil—chop and change and then copy that off again on the yellow paper—and this would go on for days sometimes. There are some instances, especially in later work, when there have been something like twenty versions of a poem.

INTERVIEWER

In the verse symphonies, you did less revising?

AIKEN

Much less. It came out like a ribbon and lay flat on the brush.

INTERVIEWER

Did you often work on two or three poems at once? Particularly when you were doing the shorter poems, like the ones in the two series of preludes?

AIKEN

No, not so much. I usually stayed with the individual item until it was satisfactory. Although sometimes I would do two or three preludes in a day, first drafts. And then all three would come in for retooling, so to speak, the next day or the day after. Those happened very fast, the preludes—especially the *Time in the Rock* ones. They were outpourings as I've only really known during that period. Didn't matter when or where I was. I remember in Jeake's House in Rye when carpenters were going through the kitchen and the dining room all the time, which is where I worked at a long refectory table, and I would just go cheerfully on turning out preludes while hammering and sawing and whatnot happened about me.

INTERVIEWER

But most of your other poems have come much more slowly?

AIKEN

Yes, much. Things like "A Letter from Li Po" and "The Crystal" were immensely labored over. Months. Very different procedure entirely. I had the idea, but it had to be developed very slowly.

INTERVIEWER

In revising, say, the shorter poems like the preludes, did you usually find it possible to revise so that you were eventually satisfied with the poem, or have you often discarded poems along the way?

AIKEN

Oh, I've discarded a great many. And occasionally I've discarded and then resurrected. I would find a crumpled yellow ball of paper in the wastebasket, in the morning, and open it to see what the hell I'd been up to; and occasionally it was something that needed only a very slight change to be brought off, which I'd missed the day before.

INTERVIEWER

Do you tend now to look on the two series of preludes as your major poetry?

AIKEN

I think those two books are central, along with *Osiris Jones* and *Landscape West of Eden*, but I still don't think the symphonies are to be despised. They've got to be looked at in an entirely different way; and allowances must be made for the diffuseness and the musical structure, which I think I overdid sometimes. Although "Senlin" I think stands up fairly well. And *Festus*, too.

INTERVIEWER

You speak of your "verse symphonies." Where did you get the idea of adapting musical structures to poetry?

AIKEN

For one thing, I always hankered to be a composer—I was mad about music, though I never studied seriously, and can't read a note. But I learned to play the piano and became pretty skillful at improvisation, especially after a drop or two. And from the beginning I'd thought of the two realms as really one: They were saying the same thing but in two voices. Why not marry them? A young composer named Bainbridge Crist, whom I met in London in 1912, introduced me to the tone poems of Strauss, and out of this came an early poem, "Disenchantment," now disavowed (though I still like parts of it). And then the symphonies. They had the tone of the time, and they married the unlikely couple of Freud and music.

INTERVIEWER

What about your new poem, "Thee"? Is it related to some of this earlier work?

AIKEN

No, "Thee" is something else again. This is nearer to some of the preludes—not so much aimed at music (*pace* the title preludes) as at meaning. But this poem, like "Blues for Ruby Matrix," for another example, just came like Topsy. It seized me at lunch, the first section, and I had to leave the table to put it down. Then it finished itself. In a way I had little to do with it. The theme is much like that of the preludes, but the style very different: I think I'd learned a trick or two from my children's book, *Cats and Bats and Things with Wings*. Short lines, no adjectives, and, for its purpose, *very* heavy rhyming. None of which was in the least calculated. Who dunnit?

INTERVIEWER

You stress in *Ushant* that about the time you were writing *Landscape West of Eden* and the preludes you were beginning to formulate a view of poetry, or of a poetic comprehension of the

world, as the only religion any longer tenable or viable. Should we be seeing this more clearly in the two series of preludes than we have, or than most critics have?

AIKEN

Yes, it was there, all right. Actually Houston Peterson in *The Melody of Chaos* got a little close to it although he had only seen the first ten or twelve of *Memnon*. But he, I think, detected the novelty of this approach to the world, or something.

INTERVIEWER

What about your later poems—are "Li Po" and "The Crystal," for example, related to the work you did in the thirties?

AIKEN

Yes, I think you can see their roots in the preludes. But again, of course, it's a more expanded thing, as the earlier work was more expansive, in a different way. "The Crystal" and the poem about my grandfather, "Halloween," and "Li Po" and "A Walk in the Garden"—I think you can see how that whole group grew out of the preludes.

INTERVIEWER

You mention "Halloween"—this has an emphasis on the American past, as does *The Kid*, which is quite a bit different from the work you did in England. Is *The Kid*—

AIKEN

That's a sort of *sport* in my career, I would say. And the vaudeville poems are another sort of deliberate divagation.

INTERVIEWER

You mean the ones you were doing very early, in the 1910s?

AIKEN

Yes. Those were based on observation; I was an addict of vaudeville, and Boston was marvelous for it. You had about three levels of vulgarity or refinement, whichever way you want to put it. The refinement being Keith's at the top, of course, and the bottom being Waldron's Casino, and in between Loews Theatre. And Loews was really the best. It was a wonderful mixture of vulgarity and invention, of high spirits and dirty cracks.

INTERVIEWER

When you started writing fiction—I suppose in the early twenties—what made you turn away from poetry, which you'd been doing up until then? Were you looking for a wider public?

AIKEN

No, it was almost wholly financial. Our income wasn't quite sufficient, and I thought maybe if I could turn out some short stories, I could make a little money. But of course that proved to be an illusion because the sort of stories I wrote could only be sold to things like *The Dial* or *The Criterion*, and I didn't make any more than I would have out of poetry. But then I got involved in it and found that it was fun, in its different way, and that in fact the short story is a kind of poem, or for *my* purposes it was. And so on it went, *pari passu* with the poetry.

INTERVIEWER

Some of your stories, like "Mr. Arcularis" and "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," have become classics. Where did you get the ideas for these stories? Dreams? Did reading Freud have anything to do with them?

AIKEN

Of course Freud was in everything I did, from 1912 on. But there was no special influence on these. "Arcularis" *did* come out of a dream, plus a meeting with a man of that name on a ship.

"Silent Snow" was a complete invention; or, let's say, a projection of my own inclination to insanity.

INTERVIEWER

Then you started working with the longer fiction—*Blue Voyage* and *Great Circle*?

AIKEN

Yes, and that was another reason for going into the short stories. Because I actually wrote one chapter of *Blue Voyage* and then stopped dead. I thought, No, I really don't know enough about the *structure* of fiction—perhaps I'd better play with the short story for a while and learn something about this. And also make a little money. So it was after *Bring! Bring!* was finished that I went back to *Blue Voyage*.

*Blue Voyage* was another matter. I really wanted, sort of in mid-career, to make a statement about the predicament of the would-be artist and just what made him tick, and what was wrong with him, and why he went fast or slow. Just as *Ushant* was the other end of that statement. "D." of *Ushant* is Demarest of *Blue Voyage*, grown fatter and balder. That was always planned—that I should, as it were, give myself away, to such extent as I could bear it, as to what made the wheels go round. Feeling that this was one of the responsibilities of a writer—that he should take off the mask.

INTERVIEWER

Show just exactly how his own mind and his own experience go into his work—

AIKEN

Yes, and to what extent accidents helped him, and mistakes even, and failures in character, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever meet Freud? Wasn't H. D. trying for a while to get you to go and work with him?

AIKEN

Freud's influence—*and* along with his, that of Rank, Ferenczi, Adler, and (somewhat less) Jung—was tremendous. And I wrote one letter to Freud, to which he never replied. I was being groomed by H. D. and Bryher to go to Vienna and take over what H. D. had been doing, that is, observer: observing: reciprocal analysis. Freud had read *Great Circle*, and I'm told kept a copy on his office table. But I didn't go, though I started to. Misgivings set in, and so did poverty.

INTERVIEWER

You've spoken a couple of times—in *Ushant* and more guardedly or more subtly in the poetry—of your faith in consciousness. You speak of the "teleology of consciousness" at one point. This sounds almost as if you're looking for a new spiritual attitude toward life, a new religion not based on religious dogma or revelation or a conventional God. Is there anything to this?

AIKEN

Possibly. I don't know whether I'd put it quite like that. Of course I do believe in this evolution of consciousness as the only thing which we can embark on, or in fact, willy-nilly, *are* embarked on; and along with that will go the spiritual discoveries and, I feel, the inexhaustible wonder that one feels, that opens more and more the more you know. It's simply that this increasing knowledge constantly enlarges your kingdom and the capacity for admiring and loving the universe. So in that sense I think what you say is correct. *Ushant* says this.

INTERVIEWER

One statement that's always impressed me is the preface you recreated for *The House of Dust* in 1948 in which you wrote that "implicit in this poem was the theory that was to underlie much of the later work—namely, that in the evolution of man's consciousness, ever widening and deepening and subtilizing his awareness, and in his dedication of himself to this supreme task, man possesses all that he could possibly require in the way of a religious credo: when the half-gods go, the gods arrive; he can, if he only will, become divine." Is that too extreme a statement, do you feel, now?

AIKEN

No, I would stand by that. Which is really, in sum, more or less what my Grandfather Potter preached in New Bedford.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first come across your Grandfather Potter's sermons?

AIKEN

I've been carrying the *corpus* of my grandfather—to change the famous saying—with me all my life. I was given very early two volumes of his sermons; and I never go anywhere without them.

INTERVIEWER

What is it in them that's been so important to you?

AIKEN

Well, the complete liberation from dogma; and a determined acceptance of Darwin and all the rest of the scientific fireworks of the nineteenth century.

INTERVIEWER

This was toward the end of the nineteenth century?

AIKEN

Middle of the century. He actually took his parish out of the Unitarian Church. As he put it, "They have defrocked not only me, but my church." For thirty years he and the church, the New Bedford parish, were in the wilderness. Then the Unitarians, about 1890, caught up with him and embraced him. By this time he was president of the Free Religious Association and was lecturing all over the country on the necessity for a religion without dogma.

And this inheritance has been my guiding light: I regard myself simply as a continuance of my grandfather, and primarily, therefore, as a teacher and preacher, and a distributor, in poetic terms, of the *news* of the world, by which I mean new knowledge. This is gone into at some length in *Ushant*. And elsewhere I have said repeatedly that as poetry is the highest speech of man, it can not only accept and contain, but in the end express best everything in the world, or in himself, that he discovers. It will absorb and transmute, as it always has done, and glorify, all that we can know. This has always been, and always will be, poetry's office.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote, speaking of the great writers of the American nineteenth century—Whitman, Melville, Hawthorne, James, Poe: "We isolate, we exile our great men, whether by ignoring them or praising them stupidly. And perhaps this isolation we offer them is our greatest gift." It seems to me you didn't receive much attention from the time of your Pulitzer Prize in 1930 until, at best, fairly recently—that you were ignored in the way you speak of for almost thirty years. "This isolation we offer" as "our greatest gift"—would this be true of yourself also?

AIKEN

I think so. I think it's very useful to be insulated from your surrounds, and this gives it to you because it gives you your inviolate privacy, without pressures, so that you can just be yourself. I think that what's happening today, with all the young poets rushing from

one college to another, lecturing at the drop of a hat and so on, is not too good; I think it might have a bad effect on a great many of the young poets. They—to quote Mark Twain—"swap juices" a little too much, so that they are in danger of losing their own identity and don't give themselves time enough in which to work out what's really of importance to them—they're too busy. I think Wordsworth and Coleridge had the right idea, too—they deliberately sequestered themselves.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the state of poetry today? We sometimes think of the period from 1910 to 1940 or so as being the Golden Era of modern American poetry. Do you think there is anything being done now comparable to the work that was done in those years?

AIKEN

No, I don't think there is. I think we've come to a kind of splinter period in poetry. These tiny little bright fragments of observation—and not produced under sufficient pressure—some of it's very skillful, but I don't think there's anywhere a discernible major poet in the process of emerging; or if he is, I ain't seen him. But I think there's an enormous lot of talent around, and somewhere amongst these I'm sure that something will emerge, given time.

INTERVIEWER

In an interview for *The Paris Review* Robert Lowell said, "Poets of my generation and particularly younger ones . . . write a very musical, difficult poem with tremendous skill, perhaps there's never been such skill. Yet the writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life." He speaks almost as if there's *too* much skill, that it's become something that's

holding younger poets back; as if they're concentrating so much on finding the perfect line or the perfect image that they aren't thinking or feeling—

AIKEN

Well, I don't think that's so, and I think possibly there Lowell is really reflecting one of his own defects, because he *is* a little awkward. What really astonished me in that interview with him is his description of his method of writing verse nowadays—writing out a prose statement first and then trying to translate it to metrics without sacrificing the phrases. Well, this is really the damnedest way of writing a poem that I ever heard of, and I don't think it's any wonder that sometimes his things sound so—so prosaic—if I may go so far.

INTERVIEWER

Poets now seem so wrapped up in the short poem and the perfect small statement; this seems to grow out of the early experiments of Pound and Williams, imagism also. Do you think that these tendencies have taken poets' minds away from larger subjects—from really *thinking* about what they're going to write about?

AIKEN

I think quite likely. That's a little apropos of what I called the "splinter" stage of poetry. And I think this does go back to the imagists and Pound, T. E. Hulme, and H. D., primarily. And of course that, as a lot of us were quick to see at the time, did impose limitations and very serious ones. That's why I suppose you could say that Williams, for all his power, never really came out with a *final* thing. In fact, I think one of his completest statements is in one of his earliest poems, "The Wanderer," which is much better than "Paterson" because in that he has a real continuing line which goes from one section to another, and it isn't so fragmented.

INTERVIEWER

What about Pound's later works? Do you think that in *The Cantos* he's found a way to give a larger organization, make a larger statement, from the earlier techniques?

AIKEN

No, I don't think so. I think that's a majestic failure. There, too, it's—he described it himself in one of his own lines: "A broken bundle of mirrors." That's exactly what it is—brilliant fragments here and there, and beautiful—but it doesn't work; there isn't sufficient mind behind it, or organizing theme. He's said this himself—but I take that with a grain of salt.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about the contemporary poets who talk about "mind expanding" or "consciousness expanding"—Ginsberg and his group? Do you think drugs can expand a writer's awareness or perceptions?

AIKEN

I've tried it long ago, with hashish and peyote. Fascinating, yes, but no good, no. This, as we find in alcohol, is an *escape* from awareness, a cheat, a momentary substitution, and in the end a destruction of it. With luck, someone might have a fragmentary "Kubla Khan" vision. But with no meaning. And with the steady destruction of the observing and remembering mind.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still waver between the view of the artist as simply supplying vicarious experience and your later view that the artist is the leader in the expansion of man's awareness and consciousness?

AIKEN

I think they can function together. I think they do. It's like two parts of the same machine; they go on simultaneously.

INTERVIEWER

When you speak of the artist as the creator and purveyor of new knowledge, doesn't this, to be effective, demand a fairly wide audience?

AIKEN

To be effective?

INTERVIEWER

Yes, socially effective.

AIKEN

No, not necessarily. I mean that can come serially, with time. A small but brilliant advance made today by someone's awareness may for the moment reach a very small audience, but insofar as it's valid and beautiful, it will make its way and become part of the whole world of consciousness. So in that sense it's all working toward this huge audience, and all working toward a better man.

© 2004 The Paris Review Foundation, Inc. All rights reserved. Nothing in this publication may be reproduced without the permission of *The Paris Review* or the original copyright holder of the text to be reproduced.