THE DIVINE PILGRIMAGE OF CONRAD AIKEN:
A STUDY OF HIS POETIC QUEST
FOR PERSONAL IDENTITY

APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Arthur M. Lampley
Major Professor

[Signatures]

Minor Professor

[Signatures]

Consulting Professor

William J. Belcher
Chairman of Graduate Studies in English

Robert B. Toulmin
Dean of the Graduate School
The search for self, which grew out of a rich tradition in eastern thought, is a dominant theme in the poetry of Conrad Aiken. Because of this theme's importance to his work, it is the purpose of this study to trace Aiken's search through the six poems contained in the volume, The Diver's Glimmer.

An in-depth study of these early poems is essential in understanding Aiken's search for personal identity and shows not only the increasing depths to which Aiken went in searching for self but also the increasing poetic skill which he used in carrying out this search.

The search began for Aiken during his tragic childhood, extended through the influence of death and the psychoanalytic movement, and continued throughout his poetry and fiction.

In the poems of The Diver's Glimmer, Aiken sets forth the foundation for the development of the theme of the search for self, which appears in almost all of his work. Beginning with The Diver's Glimmer, Aiken stresses the importance of finding a pattern or sequence and during the chaotic inner world of man. In this pace the search for self is undertaken in the form of an investigation of self-love relationship.
the second poem, the use of looking emphasizes vicarious with fulfillment as a scene of achieving a definition of self. As the protagonist becomes "other selves" through his capacity to dream, he is actually arriving at a greater degree of self-awareness.

The House of Dust reinforces the ideas presented in Forgelinn, but it also begins a new line of emphasis regarding human relationships. Aiken presents man as a being crippled by deception. In seeking a definition of self by examining and interacting with others, man is hindered by the isolation which exists between others and himself. His inability to be honest with others and with himself makes it impossible for him to discover his own personal identity.

In Looking: A Biography and The Pilgrimage of J兒童 several possible solutions are investigated by Aiken. Clues to the secret of self-knowledge are sought in nature, history, and religion; but none of those sources offers a valid answer. Festus is the only character who completes the pilgrimage, but for him the result is only a blur of colors.

It is only in Changing Kings, the final poem in the volume, that Aiken is able to accept the consequences of his search. Facing reality and its implications regarding the self involves accepting the fact that when the elusive self is discovered, it may be nothing more than a black dream.

The study shows that Aiken has carefully defined the problems involved in the search for personal identity, but the
only solutions which he offers are to continue searching or face the terrible reality of self. The study also concludes that Conrad Aiken must be praised for his enduring ability to continue his poetic search for identity regardless of the results and for his persistent attempts to poetically invite his readers to join him in this divine pilgrimage.
THE DIVINE PILGRIMAGE OF CONRAD AIKEN:

A STUDY OF HIS POETIC QUEST

FOR PERSONAL IDENTITY

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Mary Jauchen, B. A.
Denton, Texas
August, 1972
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. A DESIRE TO SEARCH</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE CHARNEL ROSE: A SEARCH FOR SELF IN THE ACT OF LOVE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE JIG OF FORSLIN: DANCING INTO THE DREAM WORLD</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE HOUSE OF DUST: EXPLORING THE PROBLEM OF ISOLATION</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. SENLIN: A BIOGRAPHY: COMMUNICATING THE DISCOVERY OF SELF</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. THE PILGRIMAGE OF FESTUS: DISCOVERING THE BLACK DREAM</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. CHANGING MIND: A FINAL STATEMENT</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

A DESIRE TO SEARCH

A large part of the history of religion and philosophy is an attempt to define the self. From classical to modern thought, man has been attempting to answer the question, "What is self?" Of course, over a period of years the form of the question has changed from, "What is the soul," to "What is the mind," to "What is the ego," to "What is the true identity." The basic quest, however, has always been the same. It is a search for the core of man—his real self.

Socrates argued in the Phaedo that the rational soul was immortal because it was a perfect and unified substance and therefore was indestructible. The Christian view, as seen in the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul, also approached the soul as a unified substance. This view, however, also saw the soul as created by God to be immortal. It placed a great value on the human personality and became the most popular conception of the self in western civilization.

Much later Descartes started with his own self as a clear and distinct idea. After trying to release himself from all doubtful beliefs, from all presuppositions, he still was forced to say, "I think, hence I am." Therefore, the whole essence or nature of "I" consisted in thinking.

The philosopher David Hume in *Treatise of Human Nature* contested the definition of the self as a unified part of man. Hume affirmed that man is "... nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux, and movement. The mind is a kind of theater where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations..." 

There were, of course, many other writers who expressed ideas regarding the self—from Darwin to Freud to James Joyce to many others. Western civilization has a rich tradition of ideas concerning the identification of the self.

---


Against this background Conrad Aiken is not unique, for he too is seeking to define the self. Yet his main method of communication is his poetry. If there is a single theme in the work of Conrad Aiken, R. P. Blackmur has observed, "it is the struggle of the mind which has become permanently aware of itself to rediscover and unite itself with the world in which it is lodged."4 Certainly one can find in one long poem after another Aiken's attempt to express and clarify the search for self. He came to call this search his "Divine Pilgrimage."5 Aiken himself has expressed his unusual preoccupation with self-consciousness when he summarized the beliefs which guided much of his work:

Consciousness is our supreme gift. . . . To see, to remember, to know, to feel, to understand, as much as possible—isn't this perhaps the most obviously indicated of motives or beliefs, the noblest and most all-comprehending of ideas which it is relatively possible for us to realize?

Because his search for self is such a dominant and important theme of his work and because it grows out of a rich

---


tradition in western thought, it is the purpose of this thesis to examine this search and to clarify Aiken's ideas concerning the self and the methods and form he used to communicate these ideas. Because Aiken is such a prolific creator, it is necessary to limit a study of this kind to a certain number of his works. This study will be limited to Aiken's *The Divine Pilgrim*. Conrad Aiken has explained the vital importance of this collection of poems in understanding his search for self. The collection, consisting of six long poems, deals with, as Aiken explains, "The problem of personal identity, the struggle of the individual for an awareness of what it is that constitutes his consciousness; an attempt to place himself, to relate himself to the world of which he feels himself to be at once an observer and an integral part."  

Several critics have attempted to trace Aiken's search for identity in his works. In 1931 Houston Peterson in his *Melody of Chaos* defended the reputation of Aiken against other major poets of the period who had received more critical

---

attention. Although Peterson has been criticized for using Aiken's work mainly to illustrate his own theory of modern literature, his main contribution to Aiken scholarship is as an initial step toward further study and understanding of Aiken's complex themes.⁸ Peterson, who writing in 1931 was able to deal with Aiken's work only up to Blue Voyage, devotes the majority of his full-length study to an examination of The Divine Pilgrim and the search for identity which is found in this collection.

Thirty years later Frederick Hoffman added a second full length study.⁹ Hoffman had an advantage over Peterson because he was able to view a greater portion of Aiken's work and to view it from a later perspective. Hoffman's knowledge of Freudian psychology and its influence on the literature of the twentieth century helps to clarify Aiken's own preoccupation with the psychoanalytic movement and his search for self.¹⁰ Unlike Peterson, however, Hoffman, concerned with both the poetry and fiction of Aiken, is unable to deal at length with any individual work. This defect is especially apparent in regard to The Divine Pilgrim. Instead his study offers a

---

⁸Martin, p. 9.


¹⁰In this regard see Frederick J. Hoffman, Freudianism and the Literary Mind (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957).
brief explanation of this collection and Aiken's emphasis on the search for identity.

At the same time Hoffman's work was published (1962), Jay Martin contributed *Conrad Aiken: A Life of His Art*. In this study Martin is particularly concerned with the development of Aiken as a writer. Since he chooses to deal with the greater part of Aiken's work, he is, because of limited space, able to deal only with Aiken's poetry and prose as they relate to his development. He considers *The Divine Pilgrim* an initial attempt by Aiken at a definition of his own developing consciousness—an attempt which was executed much more expertly in his later writing. For this reason, Martin offers good insight into the search for identity in much of Aiken's later work, but he does not spend sufficient time dealing with *The Divine Pilgrim*.

All of Conrad Aiken's major critics are aware of his great use of and dependence on the theme of a search for self. However, there is disagreement over the importance of his early work, *The Divine Pilgrim*, in tracing this theme. It is the major premise of this thesis that an in-depth study of the poems of *The Divine Pilgrim* is of utmost importance in clarifying Aiken's search; for it is in this work that Aiken lays the foundation for his later pilgrimages in his poetry and fiction. To begin a study of Aiken's pilgrimage, it is first necessary to understand the background and influences which directed Aiken's poetry toward the search for identity.
Conrad Aiken's pilgrimage seems to have begun during his childhood in Savannah, Georgia. He was born in 1889, the first of three sons of William and Anna Aiken. His father was a brilliant but eccentric doctor of medicine. When Aiken was eleven years old, he discovered that his father had murdered Anna and had then committed suicide. With the death of both parents, Aiken went to live with his great-great aunt in New Bedford, Massachusetts. This tragedy and the abrupt change from Savannah to New England were to have a marked influence on his later life and writing. Aiken seemed to possess a sense of guilt concerning the murder-suicide. In fact, many of his early poems deal with "fantasies of horrid actions and nightmares capable of serving to rationalize guilt already felt." Because of his background, he also possessed a more forceful psychiatric interest in his own past than many of his artistic contemporaries did in their own. This interest prepared Aiken for an acceptance of many of the ideas of the psychoanalytic movement.

He was influenced by this movement while he was still an undergraduate at Harvard. He puts the date of his first acquaintance with Freudianism at "about 1909 or 1910." This


13 Denney, p. 22.
acquaintance "was the beginning of a lifelong friendship with a group of doctors and prospective psychoanalysts, so that to a considerable extent I grew up and even in the psychoanalytic movement." This was just about the time when Freud was delivering his lectures to Americans at Clark University.

In fact, as a consequence of Freud's admiration for Aiken's novel *Great Circle*, published in 1933, Aiken had the opportunity to be analyzed by Freud in Europe. Aiken decided not to go, but later in *Ushant*, his autobiography, expressed some regret at having missed such an excellent opportunity.

From this first acquaintance, Aiken's work continued to reflect Freud's influence. In answer to an inquiry sent out by the editors of *New Verse*, Aiken gladly admitted he had been "profoundly" influenced by Freud, "but so has everybody, whether they are aware of it or not. However, I decided very early, I think as early as 1912, that Freud and his coworkers and rivals and followers, were making the most important contribution of the century to the understanding of man and his consciousness; accordingly I made it my business to learn as much from them as I could." Ten years later in a letter to Frederick J. Hoffman, Aiken was still aware of his indebtedness


\[16\] Denney, p. 19.

\[17\] Hoffman, *Freudianism*, p. 274.
to Freud: "For me, Freud still fits admirably in such philosophic order as I find necessary—a belief in the evolution of consciousness, awareness as our prime gift and obligation, and a Socratic desire to get on with it at all costs." 18

In reading Aiken's work it is not difficult to find reflections of the Freudian influence. In 1915 Aiken had read Freud's Interpretation of Dreams in the English translation. Later in 1933 Aiken published Great Circle, a novel in which the main character's spiritual crisis is explained in a long dream, which goes back to his childhood and gives all the essential information for understanding his problem. Aiken was expressing the Freudian idea that dreams are an essential means of explaining sources of action. 19

In the same novel a friend is speaking to Andy (the main character) concerning Andy's failure to find happiness in his married life. The reader is reminded of an analyst and his patient when Andy's friend says, "In every one of your love affairs, you've tried to make your sweetheart your mother. That's why they've all been unsuccessful. Why do you want to do it?—that's the question. It won't work. That's why sooner or later you reject or abandon them all, or they abandon you—they have to." 20

18 Hoffman, Freudianism, p. 281.
19 Ibid., p. 84.
The same Freudian background which enabled Aiken to encompass psychoanalytic theory in this novel also enabled him to continue with intelligence his pilgrimage in the search for self in his poetry. His "Socratic desire to get on with it at all costs" becomes clear as one studies the six poems contained in the collection *The Divine Pilgrim*. 
CHAPTER II

THE CHARNEL ROSE: A SEARCH FOR SELF

IN THE ACT OF LOVE

The Charnel Rose, which was first published in 1918, appears as the initial work in the collection of The Divine Pilgrim. Aiken in arranging his six poems in The Divine Pilgrim chose to place them in their order of composition rather than their order of publication.¹ This arrangement by the poet himself was an indication of his own awareness of the increasing development of his writing. By beginning with The Charnel Rose and ending with Changing Mind, the poet makes the reader conscious not only of the increasing depths to which he went in searching for self but also of the increasing poetic skill which he used in carrying out this search.

Aiken has offered several hints to the understanding of this work in the preface to the poem. He emphasizes one major theme and then suggests his method of development: "This theme might be called nympholepsy—nympholepsy in a broad sense as that impulse which sends man from one dream, or ideal, to another, always disillusioned, always creating for adoration some new and subtler fiction."² From the very outset


of the poem, the reader realizes that he will be experiencing through Aiken's poetry a variety of emotions and perceptions, dreams and desires. As Jay Martin has observed, "The poem is concerned with emotions for their own sakes, not with the situations from which the emotions arise." Aiken goes on to explain in his preface that he has chosen certain aspects of this theme—specifically an investigation of love. This investigation begins with the lowest order of love, that which is simply carnal, and proceeds from "various phases of romantic or idealistic love, to several variants of erotic mysticism; finally ending in a mysticism apparently pure." As one reads the poem, he becomes aware of the endless search on the part of the protagonist to satisfy his desire to love.

Before the reader can attempt to understand how this theme of nympholepsy expresses Aiken's basic search for self, it is necessary to understand what Aiken has offered as the central theme of The Charnel Rose.

The first five stanzas of the poem present the first dream of the protagonist. He sees a woman, "confronting sea, / With her bare arms uplifted." She is alone and frightened and appears "lost and small in a soulless sea" (Poems, p. 27).

---


4 Aiken, Collected Poems, p. 1017.

5 Aiken, Collected Poems, p. 26. All poetry selections are taken from this volume. The abbreviation Poems and the proper page number appear in parentheses immediately following the quotation.
The reader senses the illusionary aspects of this woman when the protagonist arrives:

Too late to find her, yet not too late to see,
Came he, who sought forever unsatisfied,
And saw her enter and shut the darkness,
Desired and swift,
And caught at the rays of the moon, yet found but darkness,
Caught at the flash of her feet, to fill his hands
With the sleepy pour of sands.
(Poems, pp. 27-28)

The reaction of the protagonist to the disillusionment he experiences is indicative of the problems he will face later in the poem. His first response is one of questioning:

'O Moon!' he said: 'was it you I followed?
You, who put silver madness into my eyes?--'

'O Wind!--' he said--'was it you I followed?
Your hand I felt against my face?--'
(Poems, p. 28)

The answer which he receives at this point in the poem sets the tone for his later disillusionment and disappointment:

But he only heard, in the dark, a stifled laughter,
And shadows crept past him, with furtive pace,
Breathing night upon him . . .
(Poems, p. 28)

In the second section of Part I, Aiken emphasizes love in its carnal state. In this dream the protagonist is successful, not only in seeing the woman who may satisfy his desire for love, but also in actually participating in physical union with her. The whole section emphasizes the sensual and physical aspect of the love relationship:

Breathing the perfume of her hair,
He touched her arm . . .
(Poems, p. 29)
And later the poet writes, "Her hand upon his arm was white:/ Her gown was white, and lightly blew,/ A gauze of flame it burned him through" (Poems, p. 29). The desire is culminated in the physical union of the two lovers, but even this culmination is doomed to result in disappointment. Aiken suggests the coming disappointment as early as stanza three.

As the protagonist touches his lover, he sees "red roses drop apart/ Each to disclose a charnel heart" (Poems, p. 29). But at this point in his experience the protagonist refuses to recognize the emptiness of the love he is experiencing. In fact, "(His eyes were shut for fear of seeing)" (Poems, p. 29). He chooses to ignore the emptiness of reality until his disillusionment with the love found in a mere carnal relationship overwhelms him. The dream changes and he realizes his predicament:

But the dream changed; thick minutes dripped:
Between his fingers a fleet light slipped:
Was gone, as lost . . .
(Poems, p. 30)

He is left only with the empty desire of unsatisfied love.

Whose were these loathed and empty eyes?
Who, falling, in these wingless skies?
This was not she: He rose, withdrew . . .
(Poems, p. 30)

Although he has had a more active participation in this dream, he is still left without fulfillment of his love: "He heard her whisper, felt her pass,/ Shadow of spirit over glass"
(Poems, p. 30).
Aiken begins to emphasize this feeling of unfulfilled desire. The protagonist is plagued with regret when he realizes that mere physical love is not adequate to fill the vacuum in his life. Aiken expresses this emotion when he writes:

The moon rose, and the moon set;
And the stars rushed up and whirled and set;
And again they swarmed, after a shaft of sunlight;
And the blue dusk closed above him like an ocean of regret.

(Poems, p. 31)

In his condition the protagonist sees in nature a reflection of his own chaotic emotional state. He tries desperately to achieve some semblance of order in his emotions. He is "lost, and alone, and tired . . ." (Poems, p. 33), and he can only cry out to the stars for help. He can find no relief and instead dreams of roses falling through the darkness and sees the carnal love he has experienced begin to disintegrate:

But roses fell through the darkness,
Darkness of flesh, of lust grown old . . .

(Poems, p. 33)

At this point in the poem the only optimistic development is the realization by the protagonist that physical love is not sufficient to fill his longings for identity. But this realization is of little consolation to him because he has no meaningful substitute for physical love. His awareness of his problem and his incapability to solve it only plunge him deeper into the "ocean of regret."

As Aiken introduces still another dream in Part II, he indicates a second level in the investigation of love. This second level involves attitudes and emotions which are slightly
The protagonist sees his lover as a somewhat more ideal figure rather than simply a physical object. Aiken shows how she takes on a universal appearance:

And if he touched her hand, she drew away,
Becoming someone vast; and stretched her hair
Suddenly, like black rain, across the sun
Till he grew fearful, seeing her there,
To think that he loved such a one,
Who rose against the sky to shut out day.

(Poems, p. 35)

At the same time that the protagonist is beginning to see beyond the mere physical to a higher ideal of love, he is also drawn back to his first carnal experience. The concept he holds of his lover fluctuates between the carnal and the universal. She is "someone vast" yet "... at times it seemed,/
... that she was texture of earth no less than he" (Poems, p. 35).

This dilemma, involving two levels of love, is accented by the underlying concept of time in this part of the poem. If time and the changes which it brings can be disregarded, then carnal love can be considered as a legitimate means of achieving permanent satisfaction. The present moment becomes an eternal moment. The protagonist begins to ignore the passage of time:

But you are young, you tremble because you love me,
It is all we have. Let nothing more be said.
What do we care for a star that floats down heaven,
That fiery tear of time?
It spoke to us once, it will not speak again,
It will be no more remembered than last year's rain . . .

(Poems, pp. 35-36)

He encourages his lover to follow his example, for their physical relationship can only bring them fulfillment if they do
not have to fear the disintegrating forces of time. He urges her to pretend that the star of time does not exist: "Do not look over your shoulder to see it falling! Let the star perish; we wander as we please" (Poems, p. 36).

For a short time, because they disregard the element of time, the protagonist and his lover are able to find a fulfillment for their instinct to love in the physical relationship. The protagonist, forgetting any concept of a higher ideal of love, rejoices in the present moment:

Now you no longer escape me—I have you! 
This is you, this light in my fingers; 
This air in my palm! 

But you, who walked alone beside the sea, 
Or flashed your hands into sunlight out of foam,—
You that I never thought to capture,—
Hearing the rain, you cling to me all night long . . .

(Poems, pp. 36-37)

This moment of elation is short-lived, for the searcher is soon reminded that his voluntary denial of the passage of time is not a solution to his problem of unfulfilled desire. Regardless of his efforts to make time stand still, he is continually confronted with the reality of its inexorable movement. The soft rain which had once added to the exaltation of the present moment now becomes a dreaded reminder of the passing seconds. The protagonist, as in Part I of the poem, is forced to face reality and to recognize that mere physical love cannot bring lasting satisfaction. He begins to question:

Do we brush the dust from the petal with too much kissing? 
Is the clear dew gone from the grass? 
I am consumed with grief 
For the dark wet bruise on the leaf.
But the seconds drip like raindrops,
I fear at the end of night our hearts must pass,
Let us drink this night while we have it, let us drink it all.
(Poems, pp. 37-38)

As this second wave of disillusionment covers him, the protagonist plunges once again into the "ocean of regret."

This time he plunges even deeper:

Cold wind dissolved him; white foam seethed above him;
Green darkness drank him down.
Here was a cold full music like an ocean
Wherewith to sink from death to death and drown.
(Poems, p. 39)

Frederick Hoffman sees this "struggle with death," and "the refusal to give in to it" as "the essential heart of the poem." Although this is perhaps an overemphasis of the death theme, in Part III death does become more evident, as Hoffman suggests, when the protagonist turns toward a "Satanic search for love--love which causes rather than suffers pain."

Because of his own struggle against death, the protagonist desires to involve his lover in this same horrid struggle:

You smile at me—say nothing. You are wise.
For I think of you, flung down brutal darkness;
Crushed and red, with pale face,
I think of you, with your hair disordered and dripping,
And myself rising red from that embrace.
(Poems, p. 42)

---

6 Hoffman, Conrad Aiken, p. 94.
7 Martin, p. 24.
Aiken's use of red imagery in Part III of the poem helps to emphasize this destructive aspect of love and the struggle with death. The protagonist experiences a "madness for red" and pictures himself as "a mouth for blood" (Poems, p. 41). The redness of roses is used to adorn "a rain-dark tomb" (Poems, p. 44). He sees in the roses "something . . . that's poisonous and red, torrid, malignant" (Poems, p. 45). This Satanic search for love appears to destroy all hope the protagonist once had of finding a fulfillment for his desires. Instead of leaving the carnal and climbing upward to a higher ideal of love, he has plunged deep into a cruel, death-like desire to destroy in order to find a means of fulfillment.

But even this destructive investigation of love leaves the protagonist lost in the chaos of his own emotions. He finds no order in this Satanic search and struggle:

Here's change, in changelessness: and we go down
Once more to the old chaos,
Lost hands repel and cling, the last waves break,
Once more we are forgotten, and forsaken.

(Poems, pp. 46-47)

As Part III closes, however, the searcher seems more determined than ever to continue his investigation. Even in the "ocean of regret" he resolves, "I will seek the eternal secret in this darkness:/ The little seed that opens to gulf the world" (Poems, p. 47).

From these depths of demonic love, the searcher turns to a divine concept of love. In the final part of the poem, love is elevated to a form of erotic mysticism:
God-haunted eyes and holy mouth!
No wings now fold you in:
The mystic marriage is blessed with feast,
The sacrament with sin . . .

(Poems, p. 49)

This concept offers the protagonist new hope in his struggle against emptiness and death. He becomes a victor over death in the person of Jesus Christ. He vicariously experiences a resurrection, "It is the third day. I have risen" (Poems, p. 50). But, as before, the reality around him crushes in upon his mystical experience. After claiming to be the risen Christ, he is mocked and jeered:

Laughter rushed round him; they spat upon his face;
They struck him and beat him down,
Thinking him dead, they left him in that place;
Lying against an old wall, crushed and bleeding,
With lamplight on his face.

(Poems, p. 51)

In a matter of moments he has left the glorious realm of erotic mysticism and his victory over death, and he has been forced to return to the darkness of despair:

Here, then, at last, grown weary of long pursuing,
We find the perfect darkness!
The infinite spreads before us, and shrinks to nothing.
Or must we remember, always, the sound of voices,
Our little cave of dusk?

(Poems, p. 53)

The Charnel Rose ends much as it begins. The protagonist is left with only the agony of unfilled desire and with the knowledge that his investigation of love has led him deeper into chaos. His only hope lies in his ability to go on searching. This time he must return again to his initial experience. He has tried all other possibilities:
Let us turn and go back
To the first of our loves--
The one who was moonlight and the fall of white roses!
(Poems, p. 54)

In developing his theme of nympholepsy by pursuing specifically an investigation of love, Aiken has also included a search for self; for in reality at the basis of the protagonist's unending desire to find fulfillment for his instinct to love lies a more desperate desire—a desire to find himself. Aiken repeatedly expresses the difficulty of this search. What the protagonist needs is a means to organize his consciousness, for it is in a chaotic state. The reader is given a glimpse of the chaotic inner world of the protagonist's mind:

The faces that looked at him were his own faces,
They streamed along the streets, they licked like fire,
Flowed with undulant paces,
Reflected in the darkness stared at him,
Contemplative, despairing,
Swept silently aside, becoming dim,
With a vague impotent gesture at the sky,
Uncontrolled and little caring;
And he watched them with an introspective eye.
(Poems, p. 32)

Since the mind of man is in a chaotic state, it is necessary to find a pattern in the various aspects of the mind in order to define it. This need of control is the recurring theme in the poem:

To shape this world of leaderless ghostly passions--
Or else be mobbed by it--there was the question.
(Poems, p. 32)

^Martin, p. 25.
Without some type of pattern, the emotions, impulses, desires, and thoughts are all running in their own directions, making it impossible for a man to identify himself. Consequently, the protagonist's search for fulfillment of his love instinct becomes in reality a search for a pattern around which he can organize his consciousness. As he seeks this pattern, first in the physical love relationship, then in destructive love, and finally in erotic mysticism, his disillusionment grows greater with every disappointing experience. Not only has he failed to find lasting satisfaction, but more importantly he has failed to discover a pattern which might offer him hope of self-identification. His sorrow becomes two-fold:

And he sorrowed for himself in that strange place,
And for a once more unfulfilled desire.
(Poems, p. 39)

This sorrow becomes so intense that it manifests itself in a death wish. The reader sees the searcher caught between a strong desire to die and a stubborn refusal to submit to death:

And must desire forever defeat its end?
He was tired: he longed for death.
He turned, but met himself again in darkness,
Pacing noiselessly, like a ghost through darkness;
And upon his face came softly his own breath.
(Poems, p. 39)

With each disappointing experience, he returns to the chaos of his inner mind. In Part III, after his failure to find satisfaction in the physical relationship and immediately before his investigation of destructive love, his failure to find a pattern for his consciousness overwhelms him:
He turned, and saw the world go down behind him,
Into the sounding darkness;
Voices out of tumult cried to remind him,
Wailed, and were lost in wind;
Desolate darkness, darkness of sad adventure,
Peril with watchful eyes,
Shut closely about him.

(Poems, p. 40)

During these times of dark disillusionment, the protagonist continues to search for himself. To allow himself to be engulfed in the chaos is, in reality, a surrendering to the death wish. He still stubbornly refuses to submit, even though at this point he contemplates the possibility that death might be a means to discovering his identity:

And if he should reach at last that final gutter,
Today, or tomorrow,
Or, maybe, after the death of himself and time;
And stand at the ultimate curbstone by the stars;
Would the secret of his desire
Blossom out of the dark with a burst of fire?
Or would he hear the eternal arc-lamp sputter,
Only that . . .

(Poems, p. 43)

The frightening possibility that even death might lead only to greater darkness and chaos prevents the searcher from seeking this experience. Instead he turns to love again; this time on a mystical level. This level is, in one sense, the only aspect of investigation which he has not explored. He enters into this experience with the hope of finding a pattern that will expose his identity:

Now came the final hour:
Clear music, silver horns and muted strings,
Seduced from temporal air his willing feet.
Below him sang in vain that scarlet darkness.
Now should the infinite soul be made complete.

(Poems, p. 48)
But even the mystical marriage and his identification with the victorious resurrection of Christ do not supply an adequate pattern to shape his world of "leaderless ghostly passions." He fails in his investigation of love to find a means of organizing his passions and consequently he loses himself in the chaos. Aiken concludes the poem:

Dancers arose: he had not seen them:
Hissing cymbals clashed.
The great rose blossomed with a clang of light
And withered in silent fire.
He was a part of the maniac laughter of chaos,
Rebellious chaos of unfulfilled desire.

(Poems, p. 53)

In this first poem of The Divine Pilgrim the reader becomes aware of Aiken's great emphasis on the necessity of defining the self and of the role which unfulfilled desires play in this process of definition. Aiken weaves together the themes of nympholepsy and the search for self, but leaves the searcher without a woven pattern to organize his consciousness. The searcher has been disappointed in his quest for identity and therefore the self remains chaotically undefined.

For Conrad Aiken The Charnel Rose was only a beginning step toward finding a solution to the problem of identification. For him the search for self had only begun.
CHAPTER III

THE JIG OF FORSLIN: DANCING INTO THE DREAM WORLD

In The Jig of Forslin, the second poem of the collection, Aiken continues to explain the necessity of wish fulfillment if the search for self is to result in success. Aiken explains in his preface to the poem, "This theme is the process of vicarious wish fulfillment by which civilized man enriches his circumscribed life and obtains emotional balance. It is an exploration of his emotional and mental hinterland, his fairyland of impossible illusions and dreams . . . (Poems, p. 1018). Like the protagonist of The Charnel Rose, Forslin is continually progressing from one dream experience to the next. Forslin, however, is seeking a great deal more than a fulfillment of his desire to love. His search is, from the outset, a search for personal identity. Aiken employs the weak character, Forslin, to begin to explore in depth the real problems of identity. As Aiken explains in his preface to Senlin, "Forslin, a portmanteau of the Latin words forsan and fors, is a squinting word which means either chanceling or weakling" (Poems, p. 1022). The weaknesses in the character of Forslin seem to drive him strongly towards finding compensation in daydreams. The reader is transferred from
one dream to the next as they occur in the mind of Forslin.
Therefore, the dream events of the poem are not presented
"discretely, but in flux" (Poems, p. 1018). The reader is
caught up in Forslin's world of vicarious wish fulfillment as
he seeks to find his own identity in the experience of others.

Aiken introduces Forslin—an ordinary man who lives in
the city—in the first stanza of the poem. The reader meets
him as he sits alone in his monotonous room:

Forslin, sitting alone in his strange world,
Meditated; yet through his musings heard
The dying footfalls of the tired day
Monotonously ebb and ebb away
Into the smouldering west;
And heard the dark world slowly come to rest.
(Poems, pp. 54-55)

Because of his restrained life in the city where he has been
cut off from an opportunity for meaningful experiences, he
has become capable of dreaming his experiences to fill the
void of his life. He begins to undergo "the process of vicar-
ious wish fulfillment":

Now, as the real world dwindled and grew dim,
His dreams came back to him . . .
(Poems, p. 55)

In fact, he is so successful at substituting dreams for reality
that he often confuses them:

Now, as one who stands
In the aquarium's gloom, by ghostly sands,
Watching the glide of fish beneath pale bubbles,

He did not know if this were wake or dreaming;
But thought to lean, reach out his hands, and swim.
(Poems, p. 55)

In this state of confusion between reality and the dream world,
he begins his search:

Which way to choose, in all this labyrinth?
Did all lead in to the selfsame chamber?
No matter: he would go . . .

(Poems, p. 55)

The rest of the poem is concerned with a variety of dreams. As Forslin moves through a series of dreams in the poem, he identifies with each experience. Since he does not know his own identity ("I am spread upon a fog, and know no place"), it is easy for him to take on the identity of the characters in his daydream world. He becomes a juggler who practices a balancing-ball act for ten years:

In ten years, though, I had the thing down perfect.
Ten years! I was over forty, and growing grey.

(Poems, p. 59)

As a juggler, he has sacrificed time, the possibility of marriage, and a great deal of money in order that he might learn to do the impossible trick. But his dedication and achievement are rejected by the audience because the trick appears to be too simple:

I balance the one ball on the other . . .
I walk around and keep it balancing there . . .
I toss it and catch it . . . And all the hands are silent!

(Poems, p. 60)

This rejection frustrates the juggler to the point of suicide, but, before Forslin vicariously participates in this act, he is reminded of his own world, the world of routine details:

---

I have spent years at something; and I am tired.
Let us lounge in a bright cafe, and listen to music—
Music threading the smoke of cigarettes . . .
Vermouth, then coffee . . . How much shall we tip the waiter?
Here the fatigued mind wanders and forgets.
(Poems, p. 61)

Having returned momentarily to the real world, he begins
to wonder if his identification with the juggler was legitimate.
He asks himself, "But was that I?" (Poems, p. 61). Unable
to answer, he returns to the more satisfying world of wish-
fulfillment. This time he participates in the juggler's act
of suicide:

And now, with thumb and finger he turned twice
The foolish valve that brought a double darkness--;
And would he wait in comfort, in a chair?
Or, running the yellow shade up, through the window
Watch cold stars play tragedy out there?
(Poems, p. 62)

Forslin's identification with death in this dream strongly
resembles the struggle of the protagonist in The Charnel Rose.
He is at once fascinated by the mystery and freedom of death
and terrified that it might only lead to greater darkness.
Forslin tries to solve the conflict by vicariously experiencing
death in his dream world while refusing to actually participate
in the experience in real life:

Death, among violins and paper roses,
Leering upon a waltz in evening dress,
Taking his lady's arm with bow and smile--
This is unreal. Let us pull off our gloves;
Open the doors, and take the air a while.
(Poems, p. 63)

From this point in the poem, Forslin's dreams become
even more sinister. He delights in his sadistic treatment of
a prostitute:
Starve if you like! You'll have to end it sometime.
There will be plenty more.

What can we care? You knew we wouldn't pay.
That's right, cry! It'll make you feel better, --
Meanwhile, we go our way ...

(Poems, p. 66)

He then identifies with the nobleman who cruelly murders his mistress. A priest is killed with his own crucifix, a sailor is murdered in a "peg-house brawl," and an unfaithful wife is strangled by her enraged husband. In all of these sordid episodes of Part II, Forslin participates in the dream action. There are only brief moments when he returns to his world of "Vermouth; then coffee." The rest of his time is a confusion of dreams:

Night falls with a shrill of horns; or is it daybreak?
Realities fade; dreams come; and dreams pass.

(Poems, p. 77)

From the sadistic world of murder, Forslin enters into the world of lamias, vampires, and witches. He willingly follows the vampire lover into this world:

The amazing whiteness of her skin
Had snared my eyes, and now her voice
Seethed in my ears, and a ghost of sin
Died ...  
I blew the light
And followed her, heedless of the ending,
Into the carnival of that night.

(Poems, p. 82)

After he discovers that his lover is a vampire, he destroys her with the help of a priest. But regardless of this action, he seems to regret losing her:

And I grew sad, to think that I
Should make that marvelous spirit die.

(Poems, p. 86)
In fact, he has favorable memories of this encounter with the world of evil. He finds a fascination in the mystery of his experience much as he did in the juggler's suicide, and expresses a love for the darkness:

Vampires, they say, blow an unearthly beauty,
Their bodies are all suffused with a soft witch-fire,
Their flesh like opal . . . their hair like the float of night.
Why do we muse upon them, what's secret in them?
Is it because, at last, we love the darkness,
Love all things in it, tired of too much light?
(Poems, p. 86)

Forslin's participation in violent murders, in sadistic acts of violence, and in the world of vampires and witches is in stark contrast to his real world of his crowded life in the city, where he sits monotonously in his room. Aiken, in presenting this contrast, seems to be suggesting that "the more restrained and circumscribed our lives become, the more exotic and outrageous our reveries." It is not surprising that Forslin loves all things in darkness, for he is simply compensating for the boring reality of his own existence. These compensating encounters with darkness, however, do not seem to enable him to realize his actual identity:

You nod to me: you think perhaps you know me.
But I escape you, I am none of these.
I leave my name behind me, I forget.
(Poems, p. 89)

Disillusioned momentarily by the darkness, he identifies instead with the light of religious experience. He relives

---

the miracles performed by Christ. He sees Him walking on the water, raising Lazarus from the dead, and healing the sick and the blind. But even Forslin's concept of Jesus Christ is shaded with the darkness of evil. The satisfaction he has received from his previous bizarre dreams influences his involvement in his religious dreams. After witnessing Christ's miracles, he questions, "Or was the man a god, perhaps, or devil?" (Poems, p. 90). Forslin does not seem to be able to derive the same satisfaction from participating in good as he does from participating in evil. Even his religious encounters begin to dwell on the sadistic and the cruel. John the Baptist is beheaded. Jesus is betrayed by Judas and is crucified. Forslin takes on the identity of both the betrayer and the betrayed:

"He writhes his head from side to side.
O holy Christ I have crucified!
I twist there on the cross with you;
And what you suffer I suffer too."
(Poems, p. 98)

Forslin's close identification with Christ, unlike that of the protagonist of The Charnel Rose, does not include the hope of resurrection. Forslin alludes to this possibility ("Peter said that Christ, though crucified, / Had not died") but then dismisses this possibility with questioning:

Did Peter tell me this? Or was I Peter?
Or did I listen to a tavern-story?
Green leaves thrust out and fall. It was long ago.
Dust has been heaped upon us . . . We have perished.
We clamor again. And again we are dust and blow.
(Poems, p. 99)
His identification with the life of Christ has left him as unidentified as his previous involvements in evil. As Part IV ends, he plunges back into the darkness of non-identity:

Well, let us take the music, and drift with it Into the darkness . . . It is exquisite. (Poems, p. 99)

In Part V of the poem, Forslin's problem of identity becomes even greater. He has vicariously participated in a variety of experiences and none of them has led to a discovery of self. Forslin begins to recall his dream experiences. He cannot distinguish who he is:

And I am amazed, I do not know If this is I, who drink vermouth, Or whether that was I who rode the air; I fell to an outspread net; I stabbed my lover; I kissed a vampire's hair . . . (Poems, p. 101)

In the final portion of the poem he is still uncertain:

Who am I? Am I he that loved and murdered? Who walked in sunlight, heard a music playing? (Poems, p. 111)

The poem returns to reality before it ends. Forslin is again seen, sitting alone in a "little lamplit room." His search for self has not been successful. His only hope is to continue the process of vicarious wish-fulfillment through his daydreams:

And we ourselves, dying with all our worlds, Will only pass the ghostly portal Into another's dream; and so live on Through dream to dream, immortal. (Poems, p. 115)

Aiken accomplishes two achievements in this poem in clarifying the search for self. His first one is that he
shows how the self creates other selves in order to analyze them. Through this process of analysis, it is possible to expose the real self. As man becomes "other selves" in his daydreaming and as he identifies with various situations, he is actually arriving at a greater degree of self-awareness. In Forslin's case this process is not completed. However, he does realize that he is moving in the direction of self-awareness. In comparison to the protagonist of The Charnel Rose, he is much more successful.

I have climbed the stairs with a candle between my palms
To seek the eternal secret behind a door.

(Poems, p. 102)

Just as the protagonist in The Charnel Rose vows, "I will seek the eternal secret in this darkness:/ The little seed that opens to gulf the world," so too Forslin realizes that his only hope is to continue searching for himself.

At the same time that Aiken refuses to allow Forslin to identify himself, he gives the reader a glimpse into the identity of this character. He not only reveals the concept of the self seeking itself in other selves, but he also shows how the self desires to escape the unpleasantness of reality. In Freudianism and the Literary Mind the author writes, "The ego resists with all of its strength the chains of servitude to the reality principle. It yearns for the primitive simplicity of childhood, for the fantasy of the dream-life, for

---

3Martin, p. 15.
the luxury of unconscious wish fulfillment." Obviously, Aiken has allowed Forslin to indulge in just such an experience. Forslin is a man, escaping from and substituting for reality by means of dreams. According to his preface, Aiken regards these dreams as a wholesome way of supplementing reality. These dreams, according to Aiken, are simply a means of achieving wish fulfillment and therefore emotional balance.

As Forslin searches for self throughout the poem, the reader is caught up with him by means of the poetic form which Aiken uses. The Jig of Forslin is written in symphonic form. As Aiken explains, "This method takes only the most evocative aspects of them [emotions, sensations], makes them a keyboard, and plays upon them music of which the chief characteristic is its elusiveness, its fleetingness, and its richness in the shimmering overtones of hint and suggestion." This method allows Aiken to present the dreams of his poetry in "flux." One dream runs into another until the whole poem is simply a glimpse inside the mind of Forslin. The elusive music of the symphonic form becomes a fitting form for Aiken's elusive subject matter.

In this form the positioning of the parts of the poem is important, and the effect of any one part is usually determined


by the part which precedes or follows it. As Houston Peterson has explained concerning the positioning of the parts of The Jig of Forslin:

And we get finally a whole major section of the symphony constructed of contrasts and harmonies; which, in turn, if we are careful, will differ clearly in general tone from the next major part. Thus Part IV of The Jig of Forslin (which deals with Forslin's religious debauch) owes much of its effect to its position following Part III, which deals with his caprices among lamias and vampires. 8

The contrast between the evil world of witches (Part III) and the religious world of Christ's life (Part IV) communicates to the reader the vast span of Forslin's daydreams. At the same time that he is portraying the variety and illogical sequence of Forslin's mind by the positioning of parts of the poem, Aiken ties the parts of his work together by using recurring themes. This technique is what Peterson calls the use of harmonies. 9

In The Jig of Forslin Aiken relies heavily on sadistic and cruel themes in each of the parts of the poem. Even though Forslin indulges first in the juggler's experience, later in a harlot's bedroom, then in the realm of the abnormal lamias and vampires, and finally in the life of Christ, in each varying instance Forslin is fascinated with the macabre aspects

---

7 Aiken, "Counterpoint and Implications," p. 156.
8 Peterson, p. 78.
9 Ibid.
of each experience. He commits suicide as the juggler, he cruelly scorns the harlot, he is responsible for destroying the vampire, and he becomes the betrayer of Christ. Aiken's emphasis on these destructive forces suggests to the reader again and again the inner mind of Forslin. His own weak character makes it impossible for him to take any meaningful action in his own life and consequently he attempts to identify with the characters of his morbid dreams.

Not only does Aiken use the recurring theme of cruelty, but he also depends on music to give form to his poem. The reader is first introduced to this theme as Forslin leaves the world of reality and enters into his dream world. The music beckons him to begin his search:

In the mute evening, as the music sounded,  
Each voice of it, weaving gold or silver,  
Seemed to open a separate door for him . .  
Suave horns eluded him down corridors;  
Persuasive violins  
Sang of nocturnal sins  
And ever and again came the hoarse clash  
Of cymbals . .  

(Poems, p. 55)

The music continues to accompany Forslin as he participates in one dream after another. It accompanies him as he commits suicide in the character of the juggler:

But this was peace, this darkness!—like old music,  
Music heard in a dream, or hid in a wall;  
Like a slow music, moving under a sea,  
A waveless music, seethed and frothed with starlight,  
Desireless; cold; and dead.  

(Poems, p. 63)

Later he calls on music to accompany him as he vicariously murders his mistress. The music is appropriate for the action:
Why has the music stopped? I gave no order.
Let it continue. Not the strings,
But horns and drums. And gnashing of brass . . .
(Poems, p. 71)

The soft beauty of the strings is replaced by the percussion and brass. The violence of the music builds as the violence in the dream reaches its climax:

And now there are horns and drums, they strike on silver,
Cymbals are smitten, great gongs clang;
It is as if they did it to drown a murder.
(Poems, p. 73)

Aiken uses music to take Forslin from one dream to the next. Since it is an illogical jump from one vicarious experience to another, Aiken's use of music helps to hold the poem together and to make the illogical transitions less severe. He concludes Part III with a return of Forslin to routine reality. Music is a part of this existence:

Let us lounge in a bright cafe and listen to music,
Music, treading the smoke of cigarettes.
(Poems, p. 77)

As Forslin moves from reality to the dream world of mermaids and vampires, Aiken uses his musical theme. From the music of the "bright cafe" the reader is taken into a new world by the singing of young maidens. And even the "fall of the sun is a poured music" (Poems, p. 77).

As the poem progresses, the music becomes a more powerful force in Forslin's life. He is unable to resist its influence even when it leads him further into the darkness of non-identity:

Well, let us take the music, and drift with it
Into the darkness . . . It is exquisite.
(Poems, p. 99)
In the closing moments of the poem when it becomes obvious that Forslin has not discovered himself through vicarious wish fulfillment, one begins to realize that his only salvation lies in his ability to continue the process of journeying from one dream experience to another. The music suggests the hopelessness of reaching a final answer:

The music weaves about him, gold and silver:
The music chatters, the music sings,
The music sinks and dies.
(Poems, p. 114)

Aiken has skillfully and poetically combined his subject matter and his poetic form to communicate the elusiveness of personal identity and the illogical pattern which the mind follows in searching for that identity. Yet at the same time he is able to give coherence to his poem by the use of recurring themes in each of Forslin's dream experiences. Even though there seems to be little hope of self-discovery for Forslin, the reader is aware that Aiken has not finished his poetic investigation. Through Forslin he has simply offered a possible explanation of the complex mystery of the self.
CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE OF DUST: EXPLORING
THE PROBLEM OF ISOLATION

The House of Dust reinforces the ideas presented in Forslin, but it also begins a new line of emphasis regarding human relationships and their importance in the search for self. This long poem of nearly one thousand lines, written by Aiken in about four months' time, concentrates on the life of the city.1 Aiken employs "vague nameless figures" to portray the city as one vast organism.2 At the same time he is also able to explore the mysteries of the individual ego. Aiken states the central technique of the poem in the preface, "... for the entire poem is really an elaborate progressive analogy between the city seen as a multicellular living organism and the multicellular or multineural nature of human consciousness" (Poems, p. 1021). This use of analogy causes the poem to progress "from external, mainly dramatic themes—those which attempt to portray the individuals who combine to form the city—to the inner, lyric theme, in the meditation

2 Ibid., p. 88.
of the poet who attempts to understand both the city and himself.  

To begin the poem, Aiken introduces the reader to "the wandering one." He serves as the searcher—the one seeking to understand the city and himself:

And the wandering one, the inquisitive dreamer of dreams,  
The eternal asker of answers, stands in the street,  
And lifts his palms for the first cold ghost of rain.  
(Poems, p. 115)

It is through this character that Aiken begins again the search for personal identity. As in Forslin, the dream life of man becomes of utmost importance. The searcher begins his quest:

'I will ask them all, I will ask them all their dreams,  
I will hold my light above them and seek their faces.  
I will hear them whisper, invisible in their veins . . .'  
(Poems, p. 115)

After this brief introduction, Aiken then concentrates in Part I of the poem on picturing the city and the mass of humanity which is found there. He begins by looking out of the window of a high tower. From this vantage point all the activity of the city can be observed:

Looking down from a window high in a wall  
He sees us all;  
Lifting our pallid faces towards the rain,  
Searching the sky, and going our ways again,  
Standing in doorways, waiting under the trees.  
(Poems, p. 117)

The picture he observes is of a mass of humanity. The city is one vast organism, and the people in it are seen as nameless parts rather than distinct individuals. In fact, the

---

individual becomes engulfed in this impersonal sea of humanity:

Along the darkening road he hurried alone
With his eyes cast down,
And thought how the streets were hoarse with a tide of people,
With clamor of voices, and numberless faces.
And it seemed to him, of a sudden, that he would drown
Here in the quiet of evening air,
These empty and voiceless places.
(Poems, p. 118)

From this nameless mass the observer gives the reader a glimpse of several individuals who make up the city. These people are not unique, but are rather part of a larger whole:

And there was one, beneath black eaves, who thought,
Combing with lifted arms her golden hair,
Of the lover who hurried towards her through the night;
And there was one who dreamed of a sudden death
As she blew out her light.

And there was one who turned from clamoring streets,
And walked in lamplit gardens among black trees,
And looked at the windy sky,
And thought with terror how stones and roots would freeze
And birds in the dead boughs cry.
(Poems, pp. 118-119)

Often the glimpses are filled with sorrow, discontent, mystery, and thoughts of death. But the searcher's reaction to what he sees is surprisingly favorable. He is not intimidated by the lack of identity which he observes, but rather wishes to become a part of what he sees:

And one, from his high bright window looking down
On luminous chasms that cleft the basalt town,
Hearing a sea-like murmur rise,
Desired to leave his dream, descend from the tower,
And drown in waves of shouts and laughter and cries.
(Poems, p. 119)

For him it seems much better to be in touch with reality, even when it means drowning in the masses, than to be living in a dream world of his own. Unlike Forslin, he is not satisfied
with existence only in his dream world. He also feels the need to interact with other human personalities. He feels a common identity with those who make up the city. They are all bound together in the same life cycle:

We are all born of flesh, in a flare of pain,
We do not remember the red roots whence we rose,
But we know that we rose and walked, that after a while
We shall lie down again.
(Poems, p. 119)

At this point in the poem Aiken introduces his theme of the house of dust. Not only do the people find a common identity in the same cycle of life, but they are also occupants in the same house of dust:

It is strange, this house of dust was the house I lived in;
The house you lived in, the house that all of us know.
(Poems, p. 120)

However, these common factors cannot counteract the isolation which each individual feels. The struggle to relate to others is too difficult:

And growing tired, we turn aside at last,
Remember our secret selves, seek out our towers,
Lay weary hands on the banisters, and climb;
Climbing each to his little four-square dream
Of love or lust or beauty or death or crime.
(Poems, p. 120)

The remaining stanzas of Part I are full of longing and despair. The isolation the individual feels, even when surrounded by the masses, is too great to bear. Aiken emphasizes this despair by his use of rain and wind imagery. The elements reflect the inner condition of the city dwellers:

Wind, wind, wind . . . Wind in an enormous brain
Blowing dark thoughts like fallen leaves.
(Poems, p. 126)
Rain... rain... rain... we are buried in rain,  
It will rain forever, the swift wheels hiss through water,  
Pale sheets of water gleam in the windy street.  
The pealing of bells is lost in a drive of rain-drops.  
Remote and hurried the great bells beat.  
(Poems, p. 123)

The descriptions of the weather are interspersed with  
descriptions of disappointed people. A man loses his lover  
and laments, "Yet now she has gone in silence and said no  
word./ How can we face these dazzling things, I ask you?/ There  
is no use: we cry: and are not heard" (Poems, p. 124). Another man commits suicide. A third individual mourns the death of her only son:

The mother whose child was buried to-day  
Turns her face to the window, her face is grey;  
And all her body is cold with the coldness of rain.  
(Poems, p. 126)

The only hope of conquering this sense of isolation and  
non-identity is, as in Forslin, in the world of dreams. The  
searcher who was so eager to involve himself in reality now  
flees back to the safety of the dream world:

Wind, wind, wind: we toss and dream;  
We reach vague-gesturing hands, we lift our heads,  
Hear sounds far off,—and dream, with quivering breath,  
Our curious separate ways through life and death.  
(Poems, p. 127)

The whole city escapes into this dream world. Aiken closes  
Part I with a picture of the sleeping city:

And one from his high bright window, looking down,  
Peers at the cloud-white town,  
And thinks its island towers are like a dream,  
It seems an enormous sleeper, within whose brain  
Laborious shadows revolve and break and gleam.  
(Poems, p. 127)
In Part I of *The House of Dust*, Aiken presents the predicament of the modern city dweller. His identity is lost in the mass of humanity, and he experiences the despair and isolation which results from his lost state. As with Forslin, his only consolation lies in his ability to dream and to escape the crushing reality of city life.

In Part II Aiken uses a series of apparently unrelated incidents in the life of the city to show the variety of people who are involved in its life. Although the incidents which he portrays are similar in content to those incidents in Part I, Aiken presents them somewhat more optimistically. The rain no longer falls on the city, creating an atmosphere of despair. Instead the sun has come out and a new day offers hope to the inhabitants. They enter once more into the routine of city life:

> We descend our separate stairs toward the day,  
> Merge in the somnolent mass that fills the street,  
> Lift our eyes to the soft blue space of sky,  
> And walk by the well-known walls with accustomed feet.  
> *(Poems, p. 128)*

Even a new day, however, brings tragedy to individuals. Aiken tells of a construction worker who, only the night before, has dreamed of falling. His dream is prophetic and for him the new day brings death:

> And felt his body go suddenly small and light;  
> Felt his brain float off like a dwindling vapor;  
> And heard a whistle of wind and saw a tree  
> Come plunging up to him, and thought to himself,  
> 'By God—I'm done for now, the dream was right . . .  
> *(Poems, p. 130)*
The greatest tragedy of the fulfillment of the worker's prophetic dream is that it makes only a temporary impression on the spectators. The crowd is frightened and sickened by this death, but the reaction passes quickly and they return to their own business:

The wandering lover dreams of his lover's mouth,
And smiles at the hostile sky.
The broker smokes his pipe, and sees a fortune.
The murderer hears a cry.

(Poems, p. 131)

Aiken continues to convey the variety of city dwellers as he offers a glimpse into the lives of a fortune teller, a dancer who will lose her job because of an unwanted pregnancy, a pair of happy lovers who are content just to be together, a recent widow whose grief forces her to succumb to the attentions of a stranger. A girl with golden hair dies on the operating table, and the anesthetist reconstructs her past. Aiken emphasizes the tragedy in the lives of his people. They are caught up in the web of city life and cannot escape the consequences. Each must do what he can to survive:

In one room, silently, lover looks upon lover,
And thinks the air is fire.
The drunkard swears and touches the harlot's heartstring
With the sudden hand of desire.

And one goes late in the streets and thinks of murder;
And one lies staring, and thinks of death.
And one, who has suffered, clenches her hands despairing,
And holds her breath.

(Poems, p. 143)

In Part II of The House of Dust, Aiken reemphasizes the individual's isolation and despair. In presenting a series of incidents from individual lives, Aiken begins to break down the organic mass of the city and to show its separate parts.
As Part III begins, one becomes aware that Aiken offers a clearer identification of the poetic characters he is describing. Unlike Parts I and II, which dealt with vague, nameless individuals, Part III describes characters in more detail and often gives them names. Aiken begins with the story of Tokkei, the poet. The poet has lost his lover and knows that he can never love again. Just as in Part I, Aiken uses rain to convey the mood of the sorrowing poet:

The poet walked alone in a cold late rain,
And thought his grief was like the crying of sea-birds;
For his lover was dead, he never would love again.
(Poems, p. 144)

In the midst of his sorrow, he sees a portrait painted by Hiroshige. He buys it and takes it home. This portrait of a lady becomes Tokkei's new love. He studies her picture until he creates life in her:

Until he saw those young eyes, quietly smiling,
And held his breath to stare,
And could have sworn her cheek had turned--a little ...
Had slightly turned away ...
Sunlight dozed on the floor. He sat and wondered,
Nor left his room that day.
(Poems, p. 145)

Realizing that he loves her, he is tortured by the fact that Hiroshige had died centuries ago and so too had his new-found lover. His anguish is eased by the counsel of a wise old man. He promises Tokkei that he may commune with the spirit of his lover. He says, "'And she you love may come to you when you call her'" (Poems, p. 147). Tokkei obeys the instructions of the wise old man and is able to communicate with the spirit
of the lady in the portrait. Aiken closes the incident with the death of Tokkei and a true uniting of the two spirits:

And years went over the earth, and over the sea,
And lovers were born and spoke and died,
But forever in sunlight went these two immortal,
Tokkei and the quiet bride.

(Poems, pp. 147-148)

This incident differs from the previous ones of the poem because Aiken identifies his characters. The reader is given more than a glimpse of the individual's situation. Unlike the previous incidents involving nameless people, the incidents in Part III portray individuals as unique beings. They are no longer simply a small part of a larger whole but are instead entities in their own right. This progression in the poem from the mass of humanity of the city in Part I, to a glimpse of individuals in Part II, and to a more thorough study of individuals in Part III is consistent with Aiken's poetic purpose. He is actually progressing from the concept of the city as "a multicellular living organism" to "the multicellular nature of the human consciousness" (Poems, p. 1021). As he does so, he must increasingly concentrate on the individual.

After his poetic examination of Tokkei, he tells of another man's love affair. This affair, however, does not result in the uniting of two immortal spirits. Instead it is ended when the man's wife interferes. Again Aiken identifies the character by name, suggesting she is a unique individual, not just a part of the masses:
And she was right: and Miriam found it out.  
And after that, when eight deep years had passed—  
Or nine—we met once more,—by accident.  
But was it just by accident, I wonder,  
She played this tune?—Or what, then, was intended?  
(Poems, p. 151)

From this incident the tune which the lover plays becomes the background music at a restaurant. The music begins to stir memories. In this section of the poem, Aiken describes, as Martin suggests, "that intricate process of memory, by which a chance perception leads us inevitably backwards until we recover the past, making it completely present." ¹

In this sense, the music recalls different memories to different people. Each one undergoes the process of recollection in a different way:

This melody, you say, has certain voices—  
They rise like nereids from a river, singing,  
Lift white faces, and dive to darkness again.

So says the tune to you—-but what to me?  
What to the waiter, as he pours you coffee,  
The violinist who suavely draws the bow?  
That man, who folds his paper, overhears it.  
A thousand themes revolve and fall and flow.  
(Poems, p. 151)

For the searcher, the process of recollection is not completed. He cannot specify which memory is being stirred:

So says the tune to him—-but what to me?  
What are the worlds I see?  
What shapes fantastic, terrible dreams?  
I go my secret way, down secret alleys;  
My errand is not so simple as it seems.  
(Poems, p. 152)

In poetically presenting the memory process, Aiken suggests

¹Martin, p. 42.
that its function is vital in the search for personal identity. One must be able to recall and relate past events to present and future events so that he can give order to his thought world. At this particular point in the poem, the goal of the searcher becomes much like the goal of the protagonist in The Charnel Rose, "To shape this world of leaderless ghostly passions,--/ Or else be mobbed by it" (Poems, p. 48). Just as the protagonist encounters difficulty in finding a pattern to shape his consciousness, so too the searcher discovers that the difficulty he experiences in the memory process makes his errand "not so simple as it seems" (Poems, p. 152).

In Section Five of Part III, Aiken reintroduces his house of dust theme. This time he does not clearly call it a house of dust but instead emphasizes the theme through the use of house imagery. He speaks of the love relationship in terms of walls and windows:

Your words were walls which suddenly froze around her.  
Your words were windows--large enough for moonlight,  
Too small to let her through.  
Your letters--spacious cloisters faint with music.  
The music that assuaged her there was you.  
(Poems, p. 153)

As Aiken moves from the restaurant where the music is stirring up old memories to a love relationship described with house imagery, it is difficult to follow his poetic train of thought, and it is impossible to make clear, logical connections between these segments. One should note that Aiken is increasingly moving away from the city and towards the individual self. As he does so, he places more emphasis on his theme of
the house of dust. The searcher has left the masses on the city streets, and now he concentrates on investigating the house of dust. He searches for himself, for some kind of personal identity which will offer meaning to a meaningless existence. Aiken portrays this search as a search for the inner chamber:

What, then's, the secret of this ultimate chamber--
Or innermost, rather? If I see it clearly
It is the last, and cunningest, resort
Of one who has found this world of dust and flesh,--
This world of lamentations, death, injustice,
Sickness, humiliation, slow defeat,
Bareness, and ugliness, and iteration,--
Too meaningless; or, if it has a meaning,
Too tiresomely insistent on one meaning:
Futility . . .

(Poems, pp. 161-162)

The incidents which Aiken has previously related begin to fall into place. He is characterizing through his glimpses into the lives of various individuals the futility which they experience. It is this very futility which forces them to search for something better, something with meaning. All of mankind becomes caught up in the search:

We are like searchers in a house of darkness,
A house of dust; we creep with little lanterns,
Throwing our tremulous arcs of light at random,
Now here, now there, seeing a plane, an angle,
An edge, a curve, a wall, a broken stairway
Leading to who knows what; but never seeing
The whole at once . . .

(Poems, p. 162)

Aiken momentarily speaks of a solution to the problem of futility. He speaks of reaching the central chamber:

This is the central chamber you have come to:
Turning your back to the world, until you came
To this deep room, and looked through rose-stained windows,
And saw the hues of the world so sweetly changed.

(Poems, p. 162)
The sweet change is dependent on the individual's ability to believe in something. Aiken presents this faith as a possible solution:

At the very last we all put faith in something—
You in this ghost that animates your world,
This ethical ghost,—and I, you'll say, in reason,—
Or sensuous beauty,—or in my secret self...  
(Poems, p. 163)

But even Aiken is not convinced of the validity of faith in solving the problem of futility. He questions his own conclusions:

... We pose upon them,
But find no answer--only suppositions.
(Poems, p. 163)

He closes Part III without reaching any new conclusions. The search has left him at the point where he started. His only accomplishment has been to examine more closely the individual man and his needs. He can only offer the same answer which he suggested at the close of Part I--escape into the dream world:

We open our eyes and stare at the coiling darkness,
And enter our dreams again.  
(Poems, p. 175)

In Part IV Aiken completes the progression from the multiplicity of the city to the multiplicity of the individual human mind. Houston Peterson has called this part of the poem, "an attempt to define an individual soul."^5

Man is pictured as being limited by his own range of consciousness. The theme of isolation which Aiken developed

---

^5Peterson, p. 94.
in Parts I and II becomes apparent again. Since man has a very limited ability to see beyond his own small circle of consciousness, he becomes isolated from those around him:

Well, as you say, we live for small horizons:
We move in crowds, we flow and talk together,
Seeing so many eyes and hands and faces,
So many mouths, and all with secret meanings,--
Yet know so little of them; only seeing
The small bright circle of our consciousness,
Beyond which lies the dark.
(Poems, p. 178)

Aiken begins to emphasize the importance of human relationships in finding the self. It is necessary to find out what lies behind the doors of each person's "house," for inside might lie a clue to the elusive principle of self. This is the same idea found in Forslin's search--the self seeking itself in other selves. This time, however, the selves are other individuals, not simply characters in a dream:

Well, this being so, and we who know it being
So curious about those well-locked houses,
The minds of those we know,--to enter softly
And steal from floor to floor up shadowy stairways,
From room to quiet room, from wall to wall,
Breathing deliberately the very air,
Pressing our hands and nerves against warm darkness
To learn what ghosts are there . . .
(Poems, p. 180)

These "real-life" relationships, which might help to lead to self-discovery, are very difficult to establish:

What do you know of me, or I of you?
Little enough . . . We set these doors ajar
Only for chosen movements of the music.
(Poems, p. 179)

Aiken presents dishonesty as the cause of these limited relationships. Individuals remain isolated because they are
willing to show only a part of themselves, the "chosen movements of the music." They cannot honestly expose themselves to others:

'Praise me for this' we say, or 'laugh at this,'
Or 'marvel at my candor'... all the while
Withholding what's most precious to ourselves,--
Some sinister depth of lust or fear or hatred.

(Poems, p. 180)

In fact, these individuals cannot even be honest with themselves:

... Suppose I try to tell you
The secrets of this house, and how I live here;
Suppose I tell you who I am, in fact,
Deceiving you--as far as I may know it--
Only so much as I deceive myself.

(Poems, p. 180)

Now the unifying theme of the poem becomes clear. Man, in seeking a definition of self by examining and interacting with others, is crippled by deception. He cannot truly open the door of another's house of dust. In reality he cannot open his own door because he deceives himself. He must remain isolated not only from the individuals around him but also from himself.

As in The Charnel Rose and Forslin, Aiken has used The House of Dust to present a definition of the problem, but he concludes the poem without offering a solution:

The music ends. The screen grows dark. We hurry
To go our devious secret ways, forgetting
Those many lives. We loved, we laughed, we killed,
We danced in fire, we drowned in a whirl of sea-waves.
The flutes are stilled, and a thousand dreams are stilled.

(Poems, p. 193)
As the reader follows Aiken's ideas of self through the first three poems of The Divine Pilgrim, he becomes more and more aware that the search for self is futile. The protagonist in The Charnel Rose fails to find a pattern "to shape this world of leaderless ghostly passions." Forslin begins to move in the direction of self-knowledge through his dream life, but in the end is still asking, "Who am I?" So too the question is unanswered in The House of Dust. One is left with only silence as "the music ends." Perhaps as Aiken attempted in his own life to find himself, he became progressively aware of the futility of the search. The remaining poems of The Divine Pilgrim reinforce this very idea.
CHAPTER V

SENLIN: A BIOGRAPHY: COMMUNICATING

THE DISCOVERY OF SELF

In Senlin: A Biography the reader is confronted with a man "forced by his age and character into a state of intense self-consciousness." He represents modern man, who is attempting "to relate himself to the world of which he feels himself to be at once an observer and an integral part." He is able to act at times as an independent observer of the universe:

Senlin, walking before us in the sunlight,
Bending his long legs in a peculiar way,
Goes to his work with thoughts of the universe,
His hands are in his pockets, he smokes his pipe,
He is happily conscious of roof and skies.

(Poems, p. 199)

Aiken presents Senlin as an observer of the world in which he lives. As an observer, he is able to think about the universe as being separate from himself; he is able to notice "roof and skies" on his way to work. Aiken emphasizes the "observer" quality of Senlin by presenting him in the process of some physical action. As Jay Martin points out, each section of


In the beginning of the poem Senlin is simply sitting alone in his room. He is seen as a separate entity from the world around him; he is given a kind of personal identity:

Senlin sits before us, and we see him.
He smokes his pipe before us, and we hear him.
Is he small, with reddish hair,
Does he light his pipe with a meditative stare,
And a pointed flame reflected in both eyes?
Is he sad and happy and foolish and wise?

(Poems, p. 195)

With this brief introduction to Senlin as a character, Aiken then proceeds to follow a pattern of showing Senlin's physical actions. The reader observes him as he walks along, "swings his arms/ And turns his head to look at walls and trees" (Poems, p. 196). Later the reader is able to watch him as he routinely faces a new day:

I arise, I face the sunrise,
And do the things my fathers learned to do.
Stars in the purple dusk above the rooftops
Pale in a saffron mist and seem to die,
And I myself on a swiftly tilting planet
Stand before a glass and tie my tie.

(Poems, p. 208)

Even on the job Senlin is involved in physical activity. He is a builder of walls:

I walk to my work, says Senlin, along a street
Superbly hung in space.
I lift these mortal stones, and with my trowel
I tap them into place.

(Poems, p. 208)

Aiken's recurring description of Senlin's physical activity serves to communicate to the reader that this poem is dealing with an individual. Unlike the protagonist in *The Charnel Rose* or Forslin, who are continually lost in the world of dreams and the experiences of others, Senlin has a job, performs the routine duties of every man, and expresses feelings. As he performs physical activities in the poem, the reader begins to see him as an observer of the world in which he lives.

At other times, however, Senlin becomes an integral part of the world. His identity is confused with the elements of the world:

> Has Senlin become a forest? Do we walk in Senlin? Is Senlin the wood we walk in,—ourselves—the world? Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! Again . . . No answer; Only soft broken echoes backward whirled . . .

*(Poems, p. 196)*

He sees a tree and identifies with it so completely that he becomes the tree:

> 'Sometimes, indeed, it appears to me, That I myself am such a tree . . .'

> . . . And as we hear from Senlin these strange words So, slowly, in the sunlight, he becomes this tree: And among the pleasant leaves hang sharp-eyed birds While cruel roots dig downward secretly.

*(Poems, p. 201)*

This continual confusion regarding his place in the universe is simply an indication of his incomplete identity. He might be the small man with reddish hair who arises each morning and ties his tie, but he might also be "a forest," "a tree," "ourselves," "the world." Is he a separate observer or an integral part or both?
This confusion is complicated by Senlin's added confusion "between the stages of his life. While not aged, he acts old, thus missing his youth." This fact becomes obvious when Senlin observes a passing hearse:

Senlin, walking before us in the sunlight,
Regards the hearse with an introspective eye.
'Is it my childhood there,' he asks,
'Sealed in a hearse and hurrying by?'
He taps his trowel against a stone;
The trowel sings with a silver tone.
(Poems, p. 199)

Senlin is not sure whether his youth is gone, but he feels old and unattractive. As he observes his reflection in the mirror, he remarks, "How small and white my face!" (Poems, p. 206). Later a woman tries to attract his attention. He cannot believe that any woman would consider him attractive:

Perhaps, I thought, I misunderstood.
Is it to be conceived that I could attract her--
This dull and futile flesh attract such fire?
I,—with a trowel's dullness in hand and brain—
Take on some godlike aspect, rouse desire?
(Poems, p. 209)

Reuel Denney connects Senlin's confusion between the stages of his life with his problem of personal identity. He writes, "This habit of acting while young and raw as if he were older and more jaded is both the cause and the effect of his incomplete identity." Because Senlin does not know who he is, he must reach out in desperation and become who he thinks he is. Therefore, although he is capable of acting independently,

4 Denney, p. 12.

5 Ibid.
he acts instead as if he is an integral part of the world around him. He becomes in his own mind what he sees, whether it be a forest, a tree, or a grain of sand. Although he is not aged, his confusion between the stages of his life forces him to act as an old man.

Aiken skillfully weaves these themes of confusion throughout the poem and, by doing so, communicates Senlin's lack of real identity. The poem is often difficult to understand because of the confusion which Aiken includes. As Jay Martin has commented, "The protagonist and his ego, youth and age, life and death, the conscious and unconscious self, are inextricably combined."\(^6\) It is not surprising that Senlin's search for self is such a difficult one.

Although this confusion exists within the poem and the mind of Senlin, this poem contains the clearest outline of the search for personal identity given by Aiken in *The Divine Pilgrim*. The process begins as Senlin observes himself in the mirror. In reality the process is that of self-confrontation:\(^7\)

> It is morning. I stand by the mirror
> And tie my tie once more.
> While waves far off in a pale rose twilight
> Crash on a coral shore,
> I stand by a mirror and comb my hair:
> How small and white my face!
> The green earth tilts through a sphere of air
> And bathes in a flame of space.
> (Poems, p. 206)

The "waves far off in a pale twilight" and the tilting of the Earth:

\(^6\)Martin, p. 46.

\(^7\)Ibid., p. 45.
green earth suggest that there is far more involved in the process of self-confrontation than Senlin is capable of perceiving. Ironically, Senlin notices only how he ties his tie and how white his face is. At this stage of the poem, he is incapable of seeing the real self which the mirror reflects.

Rather than being satisfied with his shallow concept of who he is, however, Senlin begins a dedicated search for some clue to the secret of self-discovery. He searches first in the realm of nature to see whether it offers a solution:

"You will think it strange," says Senlin, "but this tree Utters profound things in this garden; And in its silence speaks to me. I have sensations, when I stand beneath it, As if its leaves looked at me, and could see; And these thin leaves, even in windless air, Seem to be whispering me a choral music, Insubstantial but debonair."

(Poems, p. 200)

At first, nature (the tree) seems to provide Senlin with an insight into himself. The leaves are able to look at him and see. But their answer is "insubstantial" and Senlin is left more confused than ever. In fact, it is after this incident that he becomes a tree himself and utterly loses, at least momentarily, any sense of personal identity.

After being disappointed in nature's failure to help him, Senlin looks to history and tradition for a possible solution:

Rustling among his odds and ends of knowledge Suddenly, to his wonder, Senlin finds How Cleopatra and Senebtisi Were dug by many hands from ancient tombs.

(Poems, p. 201)
As Senlin digs into the past, great hope arises within him that this is perhaps the answer to the secret of self. Aiken's poetry communicates a sense of optimism:

What holy secret shall we now uncover?
Inside the outer coffin is a second; Inside the second, smaller, lies a third.
This one is carved, and like a human body; And painted over with fish and bull and bird.

(Poems, p. 202)

Senlin's search leads to his discovery of an ancient princess. He looks to this mummy for help:

Princess! Secret of life! We come to praise you! The torch is lowered, this coffin too we open, And the dark air is drunk with musk and myrrh. Here are the thousand white and scented wrappings, The gilded mask, and jewelled eyes, of her.

(Poems, p. 202)

Senlin's hope for an answer from the ancient past is soon destroyed. The princess offers no clue, and the question of self remains unanswered:

And now the body itself, brown, gaunt, and ugly, And the hollow skull, in which the brains are withered, Lie bare before us. Princess, is this all? Something there was we asked that is not answered. Soft bats, in rows, hang on the lustred wall.

(Poems, p. 202)

The great optimism and anticipation have turned to despair. History and tradition have failed to solve the problem of personal identity:

And all we hear is a whisper sound of music, Of brass horns dustily raised and briefly blown, And a cry of grief . . 

(Poems, p. 202)

Although Senlin's search for possible answers in nature and history has led only to disillusionment, he does seem to
be able to examine himself more carefully because of these experiences. He returns to his room and to his mirror once more. This time he is able to see a deeper reflection as he confronts himself. At least he is aware of much more than the physical activity of tying his tie:

Before the mirror I lift my hands
And face my remembered face.

Is it I who stand in a question here,
Asking to know my name?
It is I; yet I know not whither I go;
Nor why; nor whence I came.

(Poems, p. 219)

The reader is reminded here of poor Forslin, who, at the end of the poem, is still trying to identify himself. Unlike Forslin, however, Senlin seems to discover partial self-revelation. In Part III he hints at his discovery:

'Listen!' he said, 'and you will learn a secret—
Though it is not the secret you desired.
I have not found a meaning that will praise you!'

(Poems, p. 220)

His discovery is certainly different from what he had expected. The portion of self-knowledge which he has seen is not complimentary to man. Perhaps it is for this reason he is unwilling and unable to communicate his discovery:

"Death?" did it sound like, "love, and god, and laughter,
Sunlight, and work, and pain . . . ?"
No—it appears to me that these were symbols
Of simple truths he found no way to explain.
He spoke, but found you could not understand him—
You were alone, and he was alone.

(Poems, p. 221)

Houston Peterson offers this explanation in regard to Senlin's inability to communicate his discovery: "Perhaps it would be
a horrible fatal experience to look down into the depths and actually discover the secret of self. Or perhaps it would be merely a humiliating experience to look down and—find nothing there."

Although this appears to be a valid explanation, Aiken also seems to suggest that isolation of human beings makes the communication of simple truths impossible. In writing "You were alone, and he was alone," Aiken reiterates the isolation theme which was so important in the development of The House of Dust. As in this previous poem, Aiken portrays Senlin as being cut off from other human beings.

Aiken first suggests this theme by giving the reader a glimpse of Senlin as he works:

The street-piano revolves its glittering music.
The sharp notes flash and dazzle and turn,
Memory's knives are in this sunlit silence,
They ripple and lazily burn,
The star on which my shadow falls is frightened,—
It does not move; my trowel taps a stone,
The sweet note wavers amid derisive music;
And I, in a horror of sunlight, stand alone.

(Poems, p. 211)

During the day when one would expect Senlin to be interacting with other human beings, one discovers that he stands alone and experiences isolation as he works. The very nature of his job, building walls, symbolically suggests that Senlin is a victim of loneliness:

It is evening, Senlin says;
And a dream in ruin falls.
Once more we turn in pain, bewildered,
Among our finite walls:
The walls we built ourselves with patient hands;
For the god who sealed a question in our flesh.

(Poems, p. 218)

Senlin, surrounded by walls of his own making, is unable to communicate effectively with others.

After work his isolation becomes even more intense as he returns to his room:

I will leave my work unfinished, and I will go
With ringing and certain step through the laughter of chaos
To the one small room in the void I know.

(Poems, p. 215)

As a result of this isolation, when he discovers the secret of self, he cannot share it with others:

'He sought to touch you, and found he could not reach you,—
He sought to understand you, and could not hear you.'

(Poems, p. 221)

Senlin's problem of isolation greatly affects his ability to form any kind of lasting relationship. When he discovers that a woman is trying to attract his attention, he becomes very insecure:

That woman--did she try to attract my attention?
Is it true I saw her smile and nod?
She turned her head and smiled ... was it for me?
It is better to think of work or god.

(Poems, pp. 208-209)

His confidence increases as he realizes that it is possible for him to be attractive to women, but this confidence is not enough to offset his feeling of isolation. His brief love affair ends as quickly as it began:
Yes, it is true that woman tried to attract me:
It is true she came out of time for me,
Came from the swirling and savage forest of earth,
The cruel eternity of the sea.
She parted the leaves of waves and rose from silence
Shining with secrets she did not know.
Music of dust! Music of web and web!
And I, bewildered, let her go.

(Poems, p. 210)

Senlin's inability to relate to others makes his loneliness more acute. He senses a void in his life and admits, "My life is uncompleted." This emptiness inevitably leads Senlin to thoughts of death. Section Six of Part II is devoted entirely to Senlin's pattern of thoughts of death. He hears death approaching and describes death's movements:

Death himself in the grass, death himself,
Gyrating invisibly in the sun,
Scatters the grass-blades, whips the wind,
Tears at boughs with malignant laughter:
On the long echoing air I hear him run.

(Poems, p. 212)

Because he is so conscious of death's presence, Senlin warns the world that death is coming. He addresses the spider, the rose, and the maiden. He urges them to finish their respective tasks, "for death approaches."

Senlin does not appear to fear death. Perhaps his lonely life and uncertain identity make the thought of death less frightening to him. Whatever the reason, he seems willing to accept death's inevitable arrival:

I hear the sound of his feet
On the stairs of the wind, in the sun,
In the forests of the sea . . .
Listen! the immortal footsteps beat!

(Poems, p. 213)

For Senlin, death may possibly be a way of solving his problem of isolation.
Aiken, by using isolation as a minor theme of the poem and showing how Senlin's thoughts on love and death are influenced by it, reemphasizes the importance of human interaction in the process of self-discovery. He leaves the reader with very little hope of achieving communication:

... The blue void falls between,
We cry to each other: alone; unknown; unseen.
(Poems, p. 218)

The poem is in many ways vague and elusive. This quality along with the general theme of the poem has prompted one critic to write, "In Senlin the person acts as the background, the unconscious becomes the hero." Indeed, the reader can view the vague aspects of the character of Senlin as a further attempt by Aiken to present the futility of the search for self.

Since Aiken has called the poem a biography, it is only natural for him to trace the life of Senlin. The three major divisions of the poem deal with his birth, his present state, and his future. Aiken, however, does not offer any specific information about his character. Instead, he begins the poem with Part I entitled "His Dark Origins." The reader is left uncertain as to Senlin's beginning. Who is he? Where did he come from? Even Senlin himself is confused about this period of his life:

'I stepped from a cloud,' he says, 'as evening fell;
I walked on the sound of a bell;
I ran with winged heels along a gust;
Or is it true that I laughed and sprang from dust?'
(Poems, p. 195)

---

Throughout Part I the identity of Senlin is continually brought into question, "But is that Senlin?—or is this city Senlin? . . ." (Poems, p. 200); "And am I then, a pyramid?" says Senlin, "... Or am I rather the moonlight, spreading subtly/ Above those stones and times?" (Poems, p. 203). The elusive nature of Senlin's identity reaches a climax in Part II when Senlin desperately tries to identify with various objects. He becomes a house, "locked and darkened" (Poems, p. 204); he becomes a city with wind wandering among his streets; he becomes a room of rock which is darkened; he becomes a door, pierced by "the cries of music" (Poems, p. 205).

In all of these assumed identities, the reader is given only a glimpse of Senlin's mind:

Summon me loudly, and you'll hear slow footsteps
Ring far and faint in the galleries of my mind.
You'll hear soft steps on an old and dusty stairway;
Peer darkly through some corner of a pane,
You'll see me with a faint light coming slowly,
Pausing above some balcony of the brain . . .

(Poems, p. 205)

At this point in the poem even Senlin himself despairs of ever pinning down his real self:

Knock on the door,—and you shall have an answer.
Open the heavy walls to set me free,
And blow a horn to call me into the sunlight,—
And startled, then, what a strange thing you shall see!
Nuns, murderers, and drunkards, saints and sinners,
Lover and dancing girl and sage and clown
Will laugh upon you, and you will find me nowhere.
I am a room, a house, a street, a town.

(Poems, p. 205)

Part III of the poem deals with Senlin's future. Aiken calls it "His Cloudy Destiny," for Senlin's future is as
uncertain and secret as his origin and his present state. As in Part I, the reader finds Senlin sitting alone in his room and lighting "his pipe with a meditative stare." He remains as isolated as before and cries out, "How shall you understand me with your hearts,/ Who cannot reach me with your hands? . . ." (Poems, p. 220). He remains elusive to the understanding of the reader, and in the closing moments one last attempt is made to clarify his identity:

Is Senlin a grain of sand beneath our footsteps,
A speck of shell upon which waves will roar? . . .
Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! again . . . no answer,
Only the crash of sea on a shell-white shore.
(Poems, p. 220)

As Senlin: A Biography develops, the theme of the search for self grows more complex as the poem progresses. Senlin is able to look more and more deeply into his true personal identity, but the deeper he looks, the more frustrated he becomes. As Houston Peterson explains, "He looks in the mirror and sees a familiar face,—yet not familiar after all, for the better a thing is known the more mysterious and remote it often becomes." This is certainly true in regard to Senlin's search.

Aiken leaves Senlin, a character who seems to have discovered at least a part of his identity, lost in his own world of isolation and confusion:

\[ ^{10} \text{Peterson, p. 145.} \]
for somewhere, in the worlds-in-worlds about us,
He changes still, unfriended and alone.
Is he the star on which we walk at daybreak,
The light that blinds our eyes?
"Senlin!" we cry. "Senlin!" again . . . no answer:
Only the soulless brilliance of blue skies.
(Poems, p. 222)

Because Senlin is unable to communicate the secret which
he has discovered, the reader is left with only a glimpse of
the elusive self. As in the previous poems of The Divine Pil-
grim, one is given no answer, and the only hope is to keep on
searching for self:

Yet we would say, this was no man at all,
But a dream we dreamed, and vividly recall;
And we are mad to walk in wind and rain
Hoping to find, somewhere, that dream again.
(Poems, p. 222)

Jay Martin highly praises Aiken's "unwillingness to for-
mulate the 'ultimate' answers to the problems of self-knowledge."¹¹
He sees in Aiken's hesitancy to postulate an essence for the
ego a freedom from dogmatism.¹² Certainly by failing to come
to any real conclusions, Aiken has allowed himself to enter-
tain all ideas. As one critic has commented, "For this poet
there has never been an incarnation; the world is history-less,
and there is just a flow of endless possibilities."¹³

One can also view this same unwillingness on the part of
Aiken to provide the reader with any answers as a failure on

¹¹Martin, p. 48.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Padraic Colum, "The Poetry of Mr. Conrad Aiken," Freeman, 3 (1921), p. 117.
the part of the poet to accomplish his purpose. He conveys through the development of his various poetic characters (The Charnel Rose protagonist, Forslin, Senlin) the importance of achieving a sense of personal identity. Yet again and again he leaves the reader unsatisfied. Aiken often seems to become so enthralled with the process of searching that he loses sight of the goal of ending that search. He is much more content to leave his characters and his reader on the brink of discovery than to allow them the joy of plunging in. They are simply left without concrete answers, "hoping to find, somewhere, that dream again."
CHAPTER VI

THE PILGRIMAGE OF FESTUS: DISCOVERING
THE BLACK DREAM

The dream which Senlin and the reader hope to find again appears as The Pilgrimage of Festus. This time Aiken warns the reader that the poem is a dream before he begins. He writes in the preface to Festus, "His pilgrimage is not real: it is imaginary. It is a cerebral adventure, of which the motive is a desire for knowledge" (Poems, p. 1023). It can be considered a poetic study in epistemology.¹

Festus begins his pilgrimage thinking that he has conquered everything that can be conquered:

And at last, having sacked in imagination many cities
And seen the smoke of them spread fantastically along the sky,
Having set foot upon so many walls, fallen and blackened,
And heard the harsh laments of women,
And watched without pity the old men, betraying their vileness,
Tear at their beards, and curse, and die,
Festus, coming alone to an eastern place
Of brown savannahs and wind-gnawed trees,
Climbed a rock that faced alone to the northward
And sat, and clasped his knees.

(Poems, p. 222)

Of course, all of these adventures have occurred in his imagination, but for Festus, the feeling of accomplishment is still there.

It does not take long, however, for Festus to realize that he must still conquer the world of himself. The poem begins a long discussion of the attempts of Festus to discover self-knowledge. Aiken pictures Festus as joyfully beginning his new adventure:

Then Festus laughed, for he looked in his heart and saw
His worlds made young again
And heard the sound of many-peopled music
And joyously into the world of himself set forward
Forgetting the long black aftermath of pain.

(Poems, p. 224)

His first thought is that he may be satisfied with "a pastoral life of seclusion and meditation" (Poems, p. 1023). He seeks this life in the planting and tending of his bean garden. Aiken has entitled Part I of the poem "He Plants His Beans in the Early Morning." This experience is the earliest phase of his pilgrimage to discover the knowledge of self:

Festus, lighting his pipe against the sun,
Smokes in the furrows, regarding tenderly
His beans which, one by one,
Now shoulder through the dark earth sturdily.

(Poems, p. 228)

Although this quiet life close to nature is satisfying for a short period of time, Festus begins to realize that there is much more to experience. This discontentment starts to rise when Festus is confronted by his alter ego who comes to him as an old man:

He sees, in the arrowy darkness,
In a flashing garment of rain
A grey man like a pilgrim
Come slowly over the plain.

(Poems, p. 226)
This old man hints to Festus that there is much more to life than simply spending it in a quiet garden. He suggests to Festus the possibility of additional experiences:

And his eyes, for a moment, rest on those of Festus,
And Festus, troubled, lets fall the beans from his hand . . .

'It is hard, Festus, that in this soul of yours,
This so colossal world of hills and oceans,
Forests and cities of men,
You keep us here forever in outer darkness,
Wretched, in wind and rain,
Shall we do nothing but feel upon our backs
The eternal lash of rain?
Shall we do nothing, day after day forever,
But plant these beans again?'

(Poems, pp. 226-27)

The penetrating questions of the old man cause Festus to begin to evaluate his position in the universe. Even the beans serve as a reminder to him that he needs to do more than spend his life in the garden. As he observes how the beans relentlessly grow upward, struggling against clods of dark earth and hard stones, they become an inspiration to him. He imagines that he can hear them singing:

'Ah, Festus! Look how we,
Who in our caverns could not see,
But only over the blind walls blindly grope
With sensitive hands . . . having no hearts to hope,
Look now how we
Press from the black soil arrogantly . . .

(Poems, p. 228)

Festus realizes that these soulless and hopeless beans are struggling much harder than he is to escape from the narrow confines of their dark world. As a creature with soul and hope, should he not be doing the same? He is convicted by the song which the beans sing:
'Yet, none the less,—naively upright beans,—
I stand abashed before you! . . .
Is it with your own voices that you speak? . . .'

(Poems, p. 229)

It is at this decisive point in the poem, when Festus must choose between his quiet life of meditation and the larger world of additional experience, that Aiken introduces the idea of solipsism. Aiken writes most of the poem under the assumption of solipsism—"the extreme subjective idealism that believes the mind creates the world when it opens its eyes." Working under this assumption, Aiken extends the idea of self to its limit. As Festus chooses to leave the bean garden, he questions whether this is the correct decision:

"But am I then," says Festus, 'in a cavern
From which I dare not grow--
Into the universe which is myself? . . .'

(Poems, p. 229)

For Festus the universe and "myself" are synonymous. The self becomes the sole creator of reality. In this world he creates, Festus leaves the garden and seeks earthly power. He first seeks this power from the grim Sphinx. He offers her kingdoms for her love and power but finds it is difficult to please her:

"Beautiful darkener of hearts, weaver of silence,
Woman of the bitter desert and the bronze mountains,
Grim Sphinx brooding over the wind-flung dunes of time,--
Is it not enough that Festus brings you a kingdom?"

(Poems, p. 234)

He tries everything to win her favor. He brings her "jewels and spoils of an empire." He offers her desolated empires, conquered for her. He brings "vessels of gold and silver, coffers of brass." The Sphinx remains silent and unmoved. Festus is forced to beg for her attention:

'Beautiful woman! golden woman whose heart is silence! Azure pool of the eternal in which my soul bathes timidly! Pity me, smile upon me, tell me the way To the holy treasure which will unlock your love for me.'

(Poems, p. 236)

Festus begins to wonder if his decision to leave the garden and to seek earthly power was a wise one. The reappearance of the old man offers him encouragement to continue. Festus soon discovers that he has progressed a great deal from his life in the garden. He comments to the old man, "'Truly we have come far, no longer in outer darkness/ Do we stoop and plant our beans in the wind and the rain!'" (Poems, p. 237).

The old man remains unimpressed by the boasting of Festus. He reminds him that the pilgrimage has only begun:

'Ah, Festus, do not forget It is but a little way we have travelled yet From the wretched darkness of that time! Shall we take forever our ease amid silks and music Or,—up this colossal stairway,—shall we climb? . . .'

(Poems, p. 237)

As Festus hears these words, he discovers that the old man is really "himself grown old." He begins to despair of ever climbing above the darkness:

And in the returning silence it seems to Festus
This ancient figure is but himself grown old,
Grown old in misery and futility and loneliness,
Grown old in darkness and wretchedness,
Solitary and far in a wind-worn plain,
Planting his beans forever in the wind and rain.

(Poems, p. 237)

Festus, trying desperately to escape this possible fate,
continues to seek for knowledge in the realm of earthly power. He becomes a powerful emperor:

'. . . Now that the kings are conquered, west and east,'
Says Festus, 'let the dark world learn my name:
Carve it on the walls! cut deeply every stone
With "Festus!'' . .

(Poems, p. 238)

Because his own mind is the sole creator of reality,
Festus can demand that the world pay homage to his name. He orders the capital city to be called Festus. He becomes the object of worship:

'But one god henceforth, and his name is Festus.
Set images of Festus in all shrines.
Let the priests, if they desire it,
Make living sacrifices,--men and maidens,
Should they be beautiful,--for festivals . . .
It will be laughable in the streets to hear
The priests go singing "Festus!"'' . .

(Poems, p. 238)

It is during his reign as omnipotent ruler that Festus indulges in his most sadistic activities. He commands the dissection of a beautiful princess. He is intrigued by the great contrast he finds between the internal and the external appearance of the princess:

. . . Ah, princess, princess,
Inheritor of the earth! what now avail you
The beauty of flesh that shook our hearts,
Look! your hands, which lovers desired to kiss,
Festus undertakes this cruel act in the name of knowledge. As Reuel Denney states concerning this part of the poem, "Knowledge begins in hurting as well as wishing and willing and searching." Perhaps as Festus becomes more disillusioned with the process of searching, Aiken allows him "free rein in his fantasy and his actions to a sadistic vein."

Whatever the reason for this journey into the realm of the horrible, it does not lead Festus any closer to a knowledge of himself:

'We have no answer.
The thing we seek escapes us, as forever.
Let the musicians take their music elsewhere,
Play to the poor, the sick,—not to ourselves
Who find our power futile, and make of it
A cruelty . . .'

(Poems, p. 242)

While disappointed and somewhat disgusted with his own indulgences, Festus leaves the chamber of dissection and goes to observe his people. As emperor, Festus has power over them all. He notices that some of them are sorrowful:

Festus, chin upon palm, observes these faces
That swarm in the glare of noon from secret places.
Quickly they come and greedily go
To the dark-doored corners of the world they know.
Sorrow has carved them all:
They dare not lift their eyes from street or wall.

(Poems, p. 242)

3 Denney, p. 20.

4 Ibid.
There are other of his subjects which seem to be enjoying life. Their "eyes are young," they are barefooted, and "run with an armful of flowers." Festus offers to trade places with them. He offers them the artificial glory of his empire for the natural glory of their happy life. No one is willing to trade:

'Ah—you are frightened! You ask for no chariot of silver,—
No mantles embroidered with moons;

Keep your mornings, your noons,
Wild grass for your feet, blue heavens as young as your eyes,
Your arms full of flowers!
You have your glories. And as for ourselves—well, who knows?
Perhaps we have ours.'

(Poems, pp. 243-44)

Festus is becoming more and more uncertain about the ability of earthly power to lead him to the secret of self-knowledge. He soon realizes that earthly power is temporal and that even great emperors like himself are subject to death. He watches a passing funeral procession and becomes aware of his own mortality:

Festus, under a sun that burns like brass,
Leans from the wall to watch a coffin pass.
Was it preceded by a human cry,—
By one cracked trumpet-note? . . .
A sound of grief shakes faintly against the sky,—
Seems, even yet, like a ghost to float
In the glare of the sun . . . And Festus is vaguely afraid . . .

(Poems, p. 244)

Festus is confronted with the fact that temporal power does not explain to him the mystery of self-knowledge. He leaves this fantasy and attempts to discover an answer in the
spiritual realm. He enters what Aiken calls "The Forest of Departed Gods." Here he consults Confucius, Buddha, and Jesus for the answers which they might possess. Confucius tells him, "Be tranquil, stare at death,/ Live as the grass lives, uncomplaining,/ Be grateful for the sun" (Poems, p. 247). Buddha advises:

"Look through the little whirlings of night and day,
The dark brief flight of clouds and rain,
The red transparencies of pleasure and pain,—
To the white perfection of the infinite..."
(Poems, p. 247)

Finally Festus listens to the words of Jesus:

... "Heed not the absolute,
Love what is little, turn not your thoughts above
So much as here and round you,—mostly, love!"
(Poems, p. 247)

But each of these philosophic answers leaves Festus unsatisfied. He demands a more specific understanding of himself. He addresses all three spiritual leaders:

What will you give me in place of this—what power,
What majesty, what secret dark dominion,
What lucid understanding of life and death?
What knowledges—Confucius, Jesus, Buddha—
What knowledges of grain and star have you?
(Poems, p. 248)

Even these three offer him no solution, and he begins to despair of an answer: "'Is it as some say true/ That I shall have no comfort out of you?" (Poems, p. 250).

Just as Senlin was unable to find an answer in nature or history, Festus has been disappointed in religion. He turns instead to Mephistopheles. Perhaps his answer lies in evil:

Show me what evil, in this world of evil,
Turns to a profit with a wave of the wand!
(Poems, p. 252)
But before he receives an answer, Mephistopheles mysteriously becomes a beautiful woman. Festus consults the eternal feminine, but even her answer is as vague as those of the others. Festus cries, "Your 'yes' what is it but 'forever,'--/ Your 'no' what is it but 'death'?" (Poems, p. 254).

After this experience, Festus is left with the one fact of reality that he is able to recognize:

It is not Buddha, it is not Confucius,
Jesus, or Mephistopheles;
Not a dream, less than the dream of a dream . . .
It is myself alone . . .

(Poems, p. 255)

The concept of solipsism is shocking to Festus. This subjective idealism means that he is the creator of his own world. He begins to see "that knowledge is perhaps so conditioned by the conditions of the knower that it can have little but a relative value" (Poems, p. 1024). He begins to feel trapped by his own self. He cries out in anguish to be released from this limitation:

... Ah, Festus, Festus, Festus,
How always about you, greater than the world you dream of,
Rises immortally beyond you your own self's wall!
(Poems, p. 256)

He tries to persuade himself that he is free from the confines of himself. He begins in Part III of the poem to try to escape from "The Net of Himself." The Old Man of the Rain returns again. His appearance only causes more grief to Festus:

And you, Old Man of the Rain--
You whom at last I know
Are but myself grown old,
Old without glory or triumph or understanding—
Old without love, old without pity . . .
(Poems, p. 258)

Festus is overwhelmed by the futility of his search and by the concept of himself as creator of all he sees. He tries to reject these ideas:

I will not have a god in me!
I flee in panic, I dart to escape
This world of horror that flees with me--
This world that takes its horror of shape
From my brain's poor cruelty.
I flee in terror-- O Festus, find
Some doorway out of the mind!
(Poems, pp. 261-62)

He finds momentary relief from the net of himself in a fantasy world of creation. He creates a beautiful universe, and in so doing exercises a positive force on the world:

... O birch-tree! ... basalt! ... open heart and sing
A song of praise for Festus! crown Festus king.
Statelier than God made, he makes the world anew,—
A world more beautifully dedicate for you.
(Poems, p. 264)

This fantasy world of creation offers Festus only temporary relief. The reality of his situation soon destroys the dream world of his perfectly created universe. Once more he becomes a man, trapped by his own limitations:

O small weak foolish brain that dared, that dared
To dream it could ever shape
A world more singing out of this dust, ourselves!
To dream it could ever escape
The slow dull speech of dust, the gesture of dust,
The corruption of dust, and death.
(Poems, pp. 264-65)

Before the end of his pilgrimage, Festus engages in Part V in a dialogue with his alter ego. This portion of
the poem is what Peterson calls "a long interior dialogue." It is through this dialogue with the Old Man that Festus realizes that knowledge is inconclusive. But he is also assured by the Old Man that a quest for knowledge is not an end in itself:

We cannot know god. Whence came we, or whither we go. Trifles! Ignore them. Mere knowledge is nothing. We come from the shadow, into shadow we blow. Shadow we are, shadows only we know.

(Poems, p. 266)

With the discovery that his pilgrimage will offer no further answers, Festus concedes that his journey is over. He has discovered that the key to the secret of self-knowledge lies in the fact that all knowledge is inconclusive. There are no absolute answers to be obtained:

Thus ends our pilgrimage! We come at last, Here, in the twilight forests of our mind, To this black dream . . . Better it would have been To have remained forever there in the rain, Planting our beans together in the wind-worn plain! . . . Let us return . . . Are you content? . . . Let us return! . . . Where are you? I am alone . . . I am alone.

(Poems, p. 273)

Festus discovers that self-knowledge is relative to the knower. This discovery for Festus, who is looking for absolute answers, is nothing but "a black dream." He realizes that the self which he has so diligently pursued has now become much too powerful. He desires to flee from

---

its grip. At this point he understands that he would have been happier simply planting beans in his garden. At least if he had remained there, he would never have been faced with the horrible reality of himself. He wants to return to the garden, but he knows that it is impossible for him to forget the discovery he has made. He is absolutely alone, caught forever in the net of himself.

Festus has achieved the discovery which all of the characters in the previous poems of The Divine Pilgrim had tried to find. The protagonist in The Charnel Rose sought to find himself in the act of love. Forslin looked for himself in the experiences of others. The wandering one in The House of Dust battles the problems of isolation and self-deception as he searches for self. Senlin systematically investigates nature and history to see if he can discover a clue. Festus is the only character who seems to have made the discovery. Instead of being the most fortunate, he is instead the most frustrated, for unlike the others who still have hope of finding themselves, Festus must live without hope, knowing that self-knowledge is a black dream.

Even in this hopeless state, Aiken will not allow Festus to plunge into despair. Instead Aiken ends the poem exactly as he began it. Festus has conquered all, but in order to exist he must continue to search for new areas to conquer.

He begins again to search. This time he searches simply for the sake of searching, but this very act offers him the
only hope he has. Self-exploration becomes his reason for existence:

Then Festus laughed, for he looked in his heart and saw
His worlds made young again,
And heard the sound of a many-peopled music,
And joyously into the world of himself set forward
Forgetting the long black aftermath of pain.

(Poems, p. 276)

This time Festus hopes to make a different discovery. The knowledge he has found on his first pilgrimage is too frightening.

As one studies the poems in The Divine Pilgrim, one discovers the progression of the search for self which Aiken presents. Roy Harvey Pearce in The Continuity of American Poetry explains this progression:

Aiken's essential theme is modern man's search for identity, which develops into a search for a means of discovering that identity, which in turn develops into a conviction that the seeking and what is sought are one. In the end that identity is proved to be a kind of non-identity, and man to be just another product of cosmic process.

In The Pilgrimage of Festus one sees the final stage of the development of Aiken's theme. "The seeking and what is sought" are essentially the same, and the process becomes as important as the end product.

To communicate such a complex progression of ideas is a major undertaking, even for a poet such as Aiken, who in many ways seems to be personally possessed with the importance of his subject matter. In order to give poetic form to this

---

somewhat vague concept, Aiken employs the use of music. As in *The Jig of Forslin*, he helps give *The Pilgrimage of Festus* poetic coherence by employing the use of a musical theme. Since *Festus* is a symphony, it is only fitting that music helps to give the work its poetic form.

Aiken uses the musical theme to communicate the elusive inner self of Festus at the beginning of the poem. The music is an inner melody which comes from within Festus:

"Listen, Festus! How the multitudes within you
Make a slow misty music of their own!
And you too, Festus! Treader in blood of kingdoms!
You walk in a moonlit wind of dream
And you and the worlds about you are young once more
And blossom and tinkle and sing and gleam!"

*(Poems, p. 22)*

It is this same inner music which encourages Festus to begin his pilgrimage. He willingly follows the call of the music. As he sets forth joyously into the world of himself, he goes partly because he hears "the sound of a many-peopled music" *(Poems, p. 22)*. Its elusive nature makes him anxious to discover what is inside himself.

Even as he is quietly tending his bean garden, the music continues to taunt him into leaving his life of meditation and searching for self-knowledge. The rain which falls on the garden creates a haunting melody:

"It appears to him that the rain is a gorgeous music,
Sorrowful, and slow, and sweet;
Telling of hills that lie beyond the plain
And beyond the hills of sea . . ."

*(Poems, p. 22)*
The beans themselves, as they encourage Festus to leave his "cave" and to climb upward to new knowledge, seem to be singing a familiar tune to Festus. He addresses the beans:

"Is it with your own voices that you speak? . . .
It is strangely like a music I have heard--
Not, as one would expect of you, a squeak
Fainter than gossamer or cry of mote,
But the original, vast, reverberant Word!"

(Poems, p. 229)

This inner elusive music which manifests itself in the rain and the beans calls Festus to begin his pilgrimage.

Later in the poem Aiken uses the musical theme to connect one part of the poem to another. He employs the theme in a poetic sense to take the reader from one vague experience to the next. Shortly before Festus decides to seek the key to self-knowledge in earthly power, he goes through a deep state of uncertainty and depression. He is alone except for a flute-player who "blows his quavering flute." As Festus begins to gain confidence in himself and to climb "the colossal stairs of the sunlight," he becomes the flute-player and offers his talent to the Sphinx:

"Are the jewels and spoils of an empire not sufficient?
Are the notes of my flute not sweet to you?
Are my hands not yet dark enough with blood?"

(Poems, p. 234)

This recurring use of the music of the flute acts as a bridge between episodes which might in their isolation seem incoherent.

Finally Aiken uses the musical theme to reflect the emotional state of his character. As Festus becomes a
powerful emperor, the music reflects this condition. It becomes music of praise to the powerful Festus:

All music, truly,—now that we talk of music,—
Seems to be but a kind of praise of Festus.
(Poems, p. 239)

When Festus desires to trade places with the happy bare-footed youths carrying flowers, he portrays his own wealthy existence in terms of music. He has obtained all possible temporal power, and the music reflects this position. He asks the passing youth:

"What would you say to a life like mine? . . .
Music to send you to sleep, music to wake you;
Music by day and by night to chime your hours . . . ?"
(Poems, p. 243)

The emotional state of Festus soon changes when he discovers that he is caught in the net of himself. Now he begins to see that his search is a futile one. This time the music he hears is dark, reflecting his inner condition:

... Dreams, gods, visions, demons,
The strange dark music of the heart and brain
To which man marches, on his road to pain,—
All these I have sifted, I have sifted them like sands,
I have searched in vain for the secret of them all
And sadly I let them fall.
(Poems, p. 259)

Although Aiken leaves Festus in the same frustrated predicament that he has created for all his characters of The Divine Pilgrim, one must praise him for his ability to communicate with some degree of coherence the complex subject he has chosen. His skillful use of the musical theme helps to communicate the elusive inner self and the emotional state
of Festus and to convey the reader's attention from one poetic situation to another without losing that attention.

After the completion of The Pilgrimage of Festus, Aiken's "divine pilgrimage" was almost complete. He only needed to add one final coda. Changing Mind was to serve as that closing statement.
CHAPTER VII

CHANGING MIND: A FINAL STATEMENT

When Aiken collected his five symphonic poems together under the title of *The Divine Pilgrim*, he added *Changing Mind* as a final statement to the whole series.¹ Aiken explains the purpose of this final poem in its preface: "For this might be called the specific 'I' and at a specific moment in its experience, in a specific predicament: the predicament, both private and social, of the writer or artist" (*Poems*, p. 1024). It can be considered as a portrait of the artist who is looking at Forslin, Festus, Senlin, and himself.²

The main theme of the poem involves an anonymous hero who "is not only particularized, he is also shown to be the willing participant, and perhaps to some extent even the instigator, in the process of seeing himself resolved into his constituent particles" (*Poems*, p. 1024).

The poem often suggests this process of breaking down the hero into particles. Aiken writes:

Sell him to Doctor Wundt the psycho-analyst
Whose sex-ray eyes will separate him out
Into a handful of blank syllables . . . .

(*Poems*, p. 278)


With the help of Doctor Wundt, "Aiken's poetic equivalent of the several psychoanalysts of his fiction," the hero is broken down into his constituent particles. The hero realizes that this process is taking place:

(Alas, it is true I am dispersed thus,
Dissected out on the glass-topped table,
The tweezers picking up syllables and putting them down,
Particles so small they have no colour;
I am dispersed, and yet I know
That sovereign eye, if once it glare its love,
Will reassemble me.)

(Poems, p. 278)

As a result of this process of particularization, the poet is able to examine the various components of his collective ego. Jay Martin maintains that Aiken employs prose because he was unable to "adequately translate the lesson of his fiction into poetry, and, since he endeavors not to falsify his experience, it remains prose."  

The prose piece takes the reader through a series of vaudeville performances. Aiken presents these performances as aspects of himself. First he identifies with the orchestra and the audience:

What were they waiting for? 'Hearts and Flowers.'
Harry rapped his frayed bow on the lamplit tripod,
turned his smug Jewish profile from Tom to O'Dwyer,
sleekly smiling. He began briskly. The theatre was full. Three thousand faces. Faces in rows like flowers in beds.

(Poems, p. 283)

3 Hoffman, p. 110.

4 Martin, p. 89.
As he surveys the orchestra and the audience, he sees them as the various aspects of himself:

And all this, mind you, was myself! myself still asleep under the four-voiced dialogue! . . . and here I was the orchestra . . .

(Poems, p. 283)

Later he identifies with each of the vaudeville performers. He realizes that each of them represents a part of himself. In Aiken's previous poems the characters sought to understand their identities in others. Thus, Forslin participates vicariously in a variety of experiences, hoping to discover himself in them, and Senlin often identifies with objects in the universe and seeks his identity in trees, sand, and houses. The hero in Changing Mind, however, understands the identities of others in himself. He seems to have a much clearer concept of his own complexity and realizes the collective nature of his ego:

Here I was Glozo, the card eater, the ventriloquist . . . and Mrs. Glozo, the plump-rumped assistant. Here I was Tozo, the Jap, and his family of little Tozos . . . lying on their long backs and twirling purple barrels . . . Here I was Nozo, the hobo . . . I was each of these in turn, and then also I was Bozo, the muscular trapeze artist, and all the while I was Harry cocking his left eye over his fiddle, and Tom rubbing sandpaper together . . . and three thousand yellow faces perched in rows like birds . . .

All this I was, and also the amphitheatre itself, All this, but also a small room, a forest . . .

(Poems, p. 284)

As the hero understands the identities of others in himself, he does so with a specific purpose in mind. He is willing to undergo the process of being broken down into
particles so "that his increased awareness may be put at the service of mankind. He must make his experience articulate for the benefit of others, he must be, in the evolving consciousness of man, the servant-example . . ." (Poems, p. 1025).

Aiken emphasizes this purpose in the poem by including sacrificial imagery. The hero undergoes the breaking down process so that others may become aware of themselves. Subtly Aiken mentions the idea of sacrifice. He begins with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ:

... Thence up the hill
To Golgotha they jeered, and with them took
The sponge, the spear, the flask of vinegar,
And that poor king, whose madness, on a Friday,
Burned to a beauty like the evening star.
(Poems, p. 280)

Later the same crucifixion imagery appears as the anonymous hero enters kite country. He notices that on each kite hangs "a weeping woman, the arms outstretched, the feet/ Nailed at the foot" (Poems, p. 282). Aiken continues to describe the scene:

'Under the sky of kites he steps, hearing
The sad singing and whimpering of the kites,
Seeing also the blood that drips from hands
Nailed to the Crosspiece, high in air. He climbs
Slowly in twilight to the weeping-cross . . .'
(Poems, p. 282)

The idea of sacrifice makes the concept of the search for self much more meaningful. Up until this point Aiken had failed to show any real purpose in participating in the search for self. His previous characters had undertaken the task of finding their own personal identity for their own personal
fulfillment. Consequently, the protagonist in *The Charnel Rose* selfishly sets out to fulfill his own desires. As he investigates the various forms of love, beginning with the mere physical and advancing to the realm of erotic mysticism, he is concerned with only himself. His purpose is not to enlighten others, but rather to organize his own chaotic inner state. His failure to achieve this selfish purpose leaves him caught in the "rebellious chaos of unfulfilled desire."

Forslin is certainly no more successful. His overwhelming passion to compensate for his boring existence by vicariously participating in the acts of others leads him only to further disillusionment. No one profits from his experience, and even Forslin seems to learn little from his dream-world.

In *Senlin: A Biography* Aiken's character makes the long awaited discovery of the secret of self. But what he discovers is not complimentary to man, and Senlin is unable to communicate to others what the secret is. His search, like that of Forslin, profits no one, including himself.

Festus is somewhat more successful. He discovers the key to personal identity, but his discovery is a black dream and he becomes overwhelmed by his own power. He remains caught forever in the net of himself.

In all of the poems of *The Divine Pilgrim*, excluding *Changing Mind*, Aiken's characters are so caught up in their own individual quests for an understanding of self that it is
impossible for them to enlighten others. Thus, their searches become even more futile because, when a discovery is made, it is beneficial to no one.

_Changing Mind_ shows a new direction in Aiken's poetry. As Frederick Hoffman comments, "The selves are more and more to become 'myself'; and eventually they become the poet, or the poet's mind, engaged in the downright, uninterrupted, undramatized exploration of basic problems of 'myself alone.'"

As in previous poems, self-consciousness still dominates, but this time the purpose of the exploration is vastly different. No longer is the character searching for only his own benefit, but rather so that through his poetic search others may achieve a sense of self-awareness.

Aiken begs his readers to take advantage of the opportunity to learn of themselves through the breaking down of the hero in _Changing Mind_:

... O believe, believe!
Believe, grim four, believe me or I die!

(Poems, p. 283)

The sacrifice has been offered. Each individual must now ask himself, "What has made me as I am?" He must also be willing to face a direct answer, regardless of its contents.

Aiken ends the poem in Section Four asking the direct question, "What is it I inherit?" His fundamental attitudes

---

5 Hoffman, p. 110.

6 Martin, p. 91.
of pessimism and introspection are unchanged. But now instead of returning to begin the futile search again, he is willing to go on alone "and to explore the darkness itself." His final stanzas offer little hope except that one realizes that the hero is ready to ask direct questions and to receive direct answers regardless of their blackness. Aiken exhibits for the first time in The Divine Pilgrim "an awareness of reality and a facing up to its implications."

The closing stanzas become a kind of secular benediction for the long pilgrimage he has undergone. He writes:

Father and mother, who gave
Life, love, and now the grave,
What is it that I can be?
Nothing but what lies here,
The hand still, the brain sere,
Naught lives in thee

Nor ever will live, save
It have within this grave
Roots in the mingled heart,
In the damp ashes wound
Where the past, underground,
Falls, falls apart.

(Poems, p. 288)

After journeying with Conrad Aiken on his pilgrimage through six long poems, one realizes why this early volume of his works must be considered as an important foundation for Aiken's later pilgrimages in poetry and fiction.


8Martin, p. 91.

By studying this volume, one can trace the development of Aiken's ideas. Beginning with The Charnel Rose, Aiken slowly undertook "a profound quest for identity." He limited this first search for self to the area of the relationship through love. As the protagonist desperately searches for a means of organizing his passions, he moves from physical love to destructive love and finally to erotic mysticism. His disillusionment grows greater with every disappointing experience. This poem in The Divine Pilgrim reveals Aiken's great emphasis on the necessity of defining the self and of the role which unfulfilled desires play in this process of definition. Since Aiken limits the poem to a search for self in the act of love, the poem is somewhat less complex than his later work and less effective. The emotions he presents are vague and general and tend to suggest Aiken's own dim conception of the poem. Nevertheless, the poem is an initial effort in the complex problem of discovering personal identity.

Aiken goes on in The Jig of Forslin to present a more complex picture of the search for identity. This time the relationship of love is simply one of many areas which Forslin explores. Aiken presents two major ideas concerning the self in this poem. First, he shows how the self creates other selves in order to arrive at a greater degree of self-awareness.

10 Lerner, p. 87.

Second, he shows how the self desires to escape the unpleasantness of reality. This idea was to occur again and again in the poems following *The Jig of Forslin* and seems to be a factor which forced Aiken's characters to begin a new search rather than to face the answers offered by the old one. Forslin accomplishes little more than the protagonist of *The Charnel Rose*, even though he is able to search in a greater variety of experiences. His search is just as hopeless and disillusioning as that of his predecessor.

In *The House of Dust* Aiken uses "the wandering one" to introduce to the reader the theme of isolation and its relationship to the problem of self-discovery. The process of seeking a definition of self by examining and interacting with others is severely crippled by man's inability to be honest with others and himself. Each man remains trapped in his "House of Dust."

This same theme of isolation is particularized in the character of Senlin. This little man is successful in discovering part of the secret of self, but his intense isolation makes it impossible for him to communicate his discovery. It is in this poem that Aiken first emphasizes the necessity of communication in a successful search. Senlin and the reader are left "hoping to find, somewhere, that dream again" because Senlin cannot convey his discovery to others. He, like Aiken's other poetic characters, finds his only hope in his ability to continue to search.
Fectus is the only successful searcher whom Aiken includes in *The Divine Pilgrim*. After unsuccessful attempts to find the key to self-knowledge in earthly power or spiritual power, he comes to the startling realization that knowledge is relative to the knower. He becomes securely trapped in the net of himself. He has found out what the self is, but it is so powerful and so frightening that the discovery is for him "a black dream." Unable to face the horrible reality of discovery, he loses himself once more in the process of searching.

It is only in *Changing Mind* that Aiken is able at last to accept the consequences of his searching. Facing reality and its implications involves accepting the fact that when the elusive, complex self is discovered, it may be nothing but "a black dream." Self-discovery can be as disillusioning as non-identity.

In *The Divine Pilgrim* Aiken presents the chaotic world of the inner man, presents it as he sees it, but leaves it as unordered as he finds it. For many, self-exploration for its own sake is not satisfactory, but Aiken is able to examine the question of self again and again. He remains undisturbed by the chaos of the mind and the helplessness of man to find an order. His attitude is expressed in one of his short stories found in *Among the Lost People*, "The whole appearance is in reality a chaotic flux, a whirlwind of opposing forces: they and I are in one preposterous stream.
together, borne helplessly to an unknown destiny. I am myself perhaps only a momentary sparkle on the swift surface of this preposterous stream." ¹²

Whether he is momentary or immortal, Conrad Aiken must be praised for his enduring ability to continue on his divine pilgrimage regardless of the results and for his persistent attempts to poetically invite his readers to join Festus and to "joyously set forward into the world of himself."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


**Articles**


________. "The Day Before the Daybreak." *Poetry,* 40 (1932), 39-44.


Colum, Padraic. "The Poetry of Mr. Conrad Aiken." Freeman, 3 (1921), 115-20.


