

central to the diagnosis of modern man's alienation from natural instincts. This is a persistent theme of the *Rehearsals*, perhaps more implied than stated. Although he acknowledges his debt to Gide's *Journal* (1939-49), "the most constant model of a man devoted to literature," Fowle is so candid in the admission of "Yankee" limitations and so able a dramatist of the *mise en scène*—the selective prognosis of "motifs and effects" from childhood and young manhood is his deepest concern—that a comparison with Gide would seem forced and obtuse. Nonetheless, the book is a model of tact, and as prose has the rapid and innate rhythm of a *chef-d'oeuvre*. A minor reservation to such sanguine charm: the word "vast" is used too many times to be believed.

Reviewed by ROBERT KENT

### *A Little History of His Time*

**Selected Letters of Conrad Aiken**, edited by Joseph Killorin, *New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1978. xxv + 350 pp. \$15.00.*

A VOLUME so varied in subject, setting, mood, and tone as Mr. Joseph Killorin's recent edition of Conrad Aiken's correspondence defies any single reaction or logically coherent assessment. To which Aiken are we to respond? The mocking, adolescent, faddishly cynical Aiken of a great many of the letters from the beginning until almost (but not quite) the end of his career? The very nearly tragic Aiken, confounded objectively by poverty and subjectively by a near psychotic depression who somehow survives the dark thirties in Sussex? The Aiken who twice falls in love with "another woman" and does not hesitate in either instance to abandon the previous wife? The Aiken who writes enormously (and convincingly) affectionate letters to his children and who is domestically entrenched, whether in

Rye, Sussex, Brewster, Massachusetts, or Savannah, with cats, flowers, and vegetables? The Aiken who contemplates suicide and finally attempts it? Aiken the man of letters in witty correspondence with or about Amy Lowell, Henry James, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, John Gould Fletcher, Ezra Pound, and William Faulkner? Aiken the critic (and some of these letters contain remarkably penetrating interpretations and assessments of the work of his contemporaries)? Or Aiken as guide to his own not inconsiderable literary achievement? There is a sense in which one has his choice, and the mutually exclusive characters of these various Aikens virtually demands a choice. I have never read a body of correspondence from which a less consistent impression of personality and character emerged. The result is a volume which is at once remarkably engaging, fresh on every page, and at the same time undeniably frustrating.

This multiplicity is in part the fruit of the editor's stated intention, for he tells us in a prefatory note that his aim "has been to include letters that reflect Aiken in the variety of his interests and styles," and that the volume's unity "lies in the continuous arc—or 'great circle'—of Aiken's life. . . ." Beyond editorial policy, however, one suspects that self-contradiction, lack of personal coherence, is an inescapable characteristic both of Aiken and his circumstances. In fact the letters offer some reason to believe that incoherence was Aiken's deliberate choice as well as his editor's, and it is in reflecting that choice that Killorin may have done his most perceptive work—in showing Aiken in the only way in which he could honestly be shown. In any event the scattering effect gives the book its peculiar character and a great deal of its charm.

It is that same effect, moreover, which is responsible for the work's significance as a twentieth-century document, as a kind of minority report on the major literature of our times. Because Aiken registers experience as it comes, making no effort to interpret it in light of a consistent pattern of thought and feeling, he provides us with a much more vivid impres-

sion of the social and spiritual conditions of our literature than emerges from the more philosophically coherent comments of his contemporaries. Unlike most of those contemporaries, he never embraced a theology or a philosophical system of any kind. Eliot became an Anglo-Catholic, the Fugitives became Agrarians, and Frost (ideologically) a New Englander, but Aiken remained uncommitted to any shaping principle. All of these writers, in order to write, had to come to terms with the chaos of a dissolving civilization, and whereas most of them embraced a traditional (theological or social) alternative to the dissolution, Aiken may be said to have fed on the disorder itself, to have remained (helplessly but also deliberately) open to the chaos. That he knew what he was doing is clear from a comparison he makes between his own work and Eliot's (who emerges in the correspondence as Aiken's *alter ego*). It "used to make me rather miserable," remarks Aiken, that Eliot "has never especially liked my poetry: has been very guarded about it . . . for I greatly respected his judgment." "Now," he adds (in 1928), "I can see why he *does* distrust my work. His work, if you like, . . . is a chaos from which he tries to escape, or in which he tries to find a principle, an absolute; mine is a mere revelling in chaos for its own sake?" Later in the same year, with a whimsical glance at "two Taoists drinking tea" in a Chinese painting, he describes himself as a "Chaoist."

Almost forty years later, and in far better physical and psychological circumstances, Aiken is prepared to make a kind of affirmation, but it amounts to little more than an endorsement of his earlier position. In a letter (1965) to the President's Council on Aging he proclaims an "animal faith, [a] primal love of earth and sky and water and air," and he urges us "to renew every day our astonishment at being permitted to be present with these, and conscious of them." His tone in the sixties may be more hopeful than in the twenties, but an "animal faith" or a "primal love of earth," though appealing in themselves, scarcely constitute an ordering metaphysical principle. I

think it fair to say that he remained consistent in his nihilism, and that consistency, however appalling its spiritual cost, is, as I have suggested, what makes this correspondence so interesting and ultimately so valuable. Eliot and Aiken's other philosophically committed contemporaries produced (I believe unarguably) much greater literature than he; and I suspect that whether one is fortunate enough to inherit a system of thought and belief, as Medieval and Renaissance writers did, or whether he must adopt one deliberately by an act of will, as twentieth-century writers were constrained to do, some such system is requisite for literature of the first magnitude. On the other hand an "open" sensibility can provide what Aiken recognized himself to be—a not wholly attractive but an honest and engrossing index of an age. "You may not like him," he remarks of himself, "but he is at least a little history of his time, and if he offers you no moral or social beliefs, and not even much belief in personality or character . . . , he seems anyway to imply that there might be a kind of tragic virtue in this, and is for the most part consistent in his self-unwinding. . . ."

We are indebted to Killorin's excellent editorial work for making us privy to that unwinding and for giving us, through Aiken, a first-hand encounter with the spiritual preconditions of our century's major literature. We are also indebted to him simply for presenting Aiken in all his self-contradiction and chaos; for, however repelled we may be at moments in this correspondence, we finally do "like him." That is partly because he can say of his "unwinding," "And I think it all stinks, myself!" and because he can poke such delicious fun at "tomeliot" and his solemnity. But beyond those charms lie traits more deeply and lastingly likable, which are never far from the surface of the letters—honesty, compassion, true friendship, and, to a remarkable degree, humility. One suspects that the Aiken whom Killorin has given us will last longer than his work.

Reviewed by HAROLD L. WEATHERBY