CONRAD AIKEN

The Jig of Forslin. FOUR SEAS.
Punch. KNOPF.

At times, thoroughly imbued with the classical manner and scene, Conrad Aiken writes with smoothness and beauty. At other times, he suddenly lurches into passages of determined virility. He is a poet of many moods and of a splendid technique. With all his seeming objectivity he always brings a peculiar personal morbidness to bear on the objects or persons he describes. He knows the rich heritage of past poetical ages, and, though he never borrows, his

pages are alive with not unpleasant echoings. His philosophy seems to be a sort of misty irony. Yet he has written poems full of incised and vivid beauty. He has never quite attained the union of technique and idea that makes the greatest poetry; but he is an able poet and a seeker of the vision.

Aiken was born in the south, in Georgia, in 1889. He was graduated from Harvard University and has made his home near there since, though he spends much time in England. A poet and a critic by trade, he mingles seldom with poets and critics. He is independent and fearless, and his opinions, though often quixotic, are always brilliantly expressed.

"The case of Conrad Aiken, a more than ordinarily gifted poet, is typical. Facile, energetic, critical, equipped with a strong feeling for verbal color and musical subtlety, it has seemed impossible for him to rise above either his own dexterity or his enthusiasm for some one else's discoveries. Each of his four successive books has held out the promise of a succeeding coordinated and distinctive volume — a promise that has never been kept. The intrusion of outside influences, or his too-great affection for his masters, or a sex myopia, or possibly a hyperæsthetic astigmatism, has prevented him from seeing clearly what he tries so anxiously to reveal. What stands out as the most prominent of Aiken's characteristics is his way of patterning after first one and then another of his contemporaries; at times he leans so heavily upon them that their strength becomes his weakness."—*Louis Untermeyer in "The New Era in American Poetry".*

"A poem of quite another kind is 'The Morning Song of Senlin' taken from a longer poem, 'Senlin: A Biography' by Conrad Aiken. It is a lyric that sets the immensity and grandeur of nature side by side with our little deeds of every day, in sharp contrast. It is very spontaneous and original. The dew of surprise is still fresh on it. Everybody who is sensitive to contrasts between great things and small, who is capable of wonder in the thought of rising in the morning to a new day in an ancient and everlasting universe, and of setting beside the glory of that new day the least and most trivial of occupations, has felt what is said in this poem. But nobody else has put just this thing into poetry of this kind. 'The Morning Song of Senlin' is a poem for imaginative people. Practical people may stumble over this juxtaposition of great things and small in it. They are accustomed to having poets tell them that grandeur and immensity are near at hand. But they are not accustomed to having the idea put into poetry in the words of a man who is only standing before a mirror and tying his necktie. They prefer to think that the person who speaks of grandeur is perched upon a remote and chilly hill-top with nothing to occupy him but contemplation, or that he paces some romantic stage with his eyes rolling in fine frenzy as he talks. They are tempted to forget that, for nearly everybody, the perception of beauty would be impossible if it had to be made into a vocation.

"Mr. Aiken's poem is brave with the elation of the morning and it is written with enough restraint to save it from any real and damaging incongruities. Moreover, Mr. Aiken is a master of rhythm, and the cool lyrical movement of the lines of this poem combines in a subtle and delicate way the qualities of speech and song."—*Marguerite Wilkinson in "New Voices".*

"Mr. Aiken took the theme of 'Punch' as Goethe took the theme of 'Faust', and his conception of his story is no less great than was Goethe's of his. If 'Punch' fails to receive a public response equal to that accorded to 'Faust', the reason does not lie in its conception or treatment, but in the fact that the 'Faust' story is more nearly related to common humanity. It may, or may not, be true that mankind is held in the net of an inexorable Fate; but, true or not, such a theory is certainly unpopular. What the public accepts or refuses in the realm of speculation need concern the poet no whit, however. He has got hold of a superb theme, and he has carried it out superbly. . . . It has never been in individual scenes that Mr. Aiken's long poems have failed; what he has not succeeded in has been the building up of the whole. His poetical architectonics have been weak. No such reproach attaches to 'Punch'. In this poem, the architectonics are beautifully managed. Nothing could be better than the progression of the different parts of the poem." — *Amy Lowell in "The New Republic", September 28, 1921.*

"It is an entertaining book ['Punch'] and it marks the breaking of new ground for Mr. Aiken. But the story is not developed so as to give us the whole of Punch's personality. On the side of Punch the braggart, Mr. Aiken is full enough, but he is not full on the side of Punch the villain. This is a pity; for as one reads what Punch has to tell us about his adventures with Polly Prim and his conquest of the Queen of Sheba, one sees Mr. Aiken making headway with a good story indeed."—*Padraic Colum in "The Freeman", April 13, 1921.*

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