



BETWEEN FICTION AND NON-FICTION: AIKEN'S *USHANT*, A JOURNEY WITHIN

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with the study of the self by the noted 20th century American author Conrad Aiken through his works, particularly his autobiographical work titled Ushant. The book is neither a fictional piece of writing nor is it an autobiography in the traditional sense of the word. Using a novelistic form the author analyzes his past under a thin disguise of fiction. Aiken believed that by writing as truthfully as one can about oneself, one experiences a sense of relief. At the same time the writer is also able to view past incidents in a better perspective.

Key words: *self, autobiographical, fiction, writing, perspective*

Artists have been interested in the study of self from time immemorial. From the ancient writers like Aristotle, who talked about catharsis of the human soul, to the present day writers of biographies and autobiographies, all have been consistently engaged in an analysis of the psyche. The advent of the psychological theories of Freud and his disciples gave this quest a more harmonized and scientific nature. Conrad Aiken (a twentieth century American writer), too, was influenced by Freud. Aiken's regard for Freud and his principles, and his interest in psychology led him to explore his own unconscious in his works

The title itself is ironical. Ushant is an English version of Ile d' Ouessant, a dragon shaped rock off the British coast, which is dangerous to ships. The name thus stands for a voyage into the forbidden areas. Again Ushant is pronounced like "You Shan't" in English, symbolizing the dangers of self-quest which Aiken has embarked on, in this book. On the surface level, the book constitutes the experiences of a man voyaging on a ship from America to England, in the post-World-War II era.

Ushant: An Essay (1952) is not an autobiography in the conventional sense of the word. It is not written in the first person. The main character is called D. who reflects on his life. But Ushant is not a fictional piece of writing either. It was a statement by the author about himself at the end of his career. Aiken admits in his preface to Three Novels (1965) that Ushant is "a

kind of autobiography, narrated in the third person, and of which the hero, D., is really the Demarest of Blue Voyage "(Aiken,n.pag.)

Aiken chose the novelistic form and third person narration for his autobiographical account; because he was aware of the problems of writing an autobiography, where narrating life experiences can become statements of self-praise. Besides, this form gave Aiken an added advantage of objectivity, and the examiner Aiken examines D's life with critical eyes.

While Aiken speculates about his life, he changes the names of the persona involved. Malcolm Lowry becomes "Hambo" and Aiken's three wives become Lorelie One, Two and Three. Aiken does not present before us, the whole of his life, rather he selects certain aspects of his life and analyzes them. Martin says that "Ushant has the analytic qualities of criticism, and therefore Aiken appropriately gave it the subtitle 'An Essay!'"

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The very first paragraph of Ushant reveals to us the complexity of the thoughts of its author. Aiken begins, "beginning without beginning, water without a seam" (Aiken, Ushant_3), and indicates that the book is going to be a voyage where there is an "Infinitesimal ship like a tiny luminous dream in the terrible, yes, lethal, yes, murderous, sleep of the sea" (Aiken, Ushant 3). The protagonist is dreaming about the dangers of the sea and of Ushant, the dangerous rock, but the dream is interrupted by the ringing of the bells on the ship.

The other characters play no role in the book except that of bringing D. back to the present while D. lying in his cabin ruminates over his past. Throughout the book, Aiken uses some situation in the present time which evokes thoughts about D's past. For instance, when D. thinks about Hardie's illness and approaching death, he is reminded of all the people in his life, his uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends, who are now dead.

D. remembers travelling to his house at Saltinge (England), where Lorelie Three has preceded him. D. realizes that slowly the house has "subtly blended with himself" (Aiken, Ushant 22). He is aware that the house at Saltinge is a projection of his house in Savannah: "was it in fact simply the Savannah house repeated, transposed to another country, translated into another language, made more beautiful, but now wholly unlike that other his own?"

(Aiken, Ushant 22). The city of Savannah had made a deep impression on Aiken. It was his home for the first eleven years of his life.

D. himself admits that he had tried to make at Saltinge a house similar to his childhood house at Savannah. And Aiken realized that if England was his mother country then the house at Saltinge was the womb. Thus, it was the desire to regain childhood comforts which prompted Aiken to create a house similar to his childhood house.

There were also questions concerning his identity: "how is it that I am I? Why was I not someone else?" (Aiken, Ushant 43). Such questions show that Aiken was concerned with the problem of his identity from an early age. We see that Aiken does not mention any date or time, but just moves from one image to another.

Aiken uses the freedom that the stream of consciousness technique provides. Moving from simpler image of his early childhood he gives a view of his most tragic experience.

After Aiken's parents died, he was adopted by uncle Hopkins Tillinghast, while his siblings were taken away by other relatives. In this way Aiken lost not only his parents, but his brothers and sister too. All these people helped Aiken to shape his identity and understand his roots.

One particular incident was very important to D. because it gave him sense of identity within the group. Once Aunt Jean fell down from stairs and was bedridden, and in a state of delirium she mistook D. sometimes for her son, sometimes for her husband, and sometimes for her father. This gave D. a feeling of "the queer ambiguity and of being of group anonymity and individual identity" (Aiken, Ushant 96). Soon after, Aunt Jean dies. Aiken was so impressed by her goodness that he named his three children after her.

As we discussed earlier, the technique that Aiken uses "accounts for the simultaneity in Ushant, giving one the sense that D's entire life is present at all times" (Siegel, 166). D. goes back to his early childhood and remembers an incident when one night his mother came to say goodnight to him and sought an assurance from him that "when he had grown up, he would protect her, wouldn't he?" (Aiken, Ushant 90). This scene taken together with the tragedy of the murder of Aiken's mother indicated how emotionally demanding such a memory would have been for Aiken.

Section three takes D. into the memories of his sea life. D. says that he was obsessed with ships right from his childhood. The house that D. took at Salting "looked at the sea, another house at South Yarmouth was "salt-soaked." Even the cottage at Duxbury was near the "blue bay." Thus, most of the places where Aiken lived were near the sea shore. Another psychological tie with the sea was provided by the fact that D's mother survived from a sea

storm when she was pregnant, therefore D. feels that even before he was born, he had a special relationship with the sea. Most of Aiken's fiction reflects this love of the sea in his loving description of the coastal environment and climate.

Going into his adulthood memories, D. remembers the prediction of a clairvoyant who had said the D. was a genius but he would fail in life for want of the ability to communicate properly. During his years at Harvard D. spent two weeks on a verse translation of Gautier's Morte Amoureuse, missing his routine classes. For this he got a pointed yet gentle rebuke from the Dean. Using this as a pretext, D. left Harvard, but his real reason was that he was too shy. Through this incident Aiken realizes that he had a "petit mal" - a strain of insanity - which runs in his family. Many times in Aiken's life he was aware that his mind was on the brink of madness and on such occasions he secluded himself from all social contacts. Thus analyzing his resignation from Harvard, Aiken finds that personal weakness was the reason why he avoided public appearances.

The fifth section of the book takes us into the war scenario and D. laments his leaving England due to the war. Discussing his literary views Aiken places considerable stress on the psychological doctrines and their application to literary analysis.

The same attempt to understand his own psyche continues when Aiken admits to have attempted suicide. The time is post-war and D. has returned to Salting and D's relations with Lorelie Two are declining.

Reuel points out that the oedipal conflict in Aiken's life could not develop because his father dies when he was eleven and "The same act that deprived the child of the conflict also deprived him of his mother, the conflict's prize" (Reuel 21). We can say that Aiken could not develop out of his oedipal conflict because of the death of his parents and the conflict remained with him forever. Thus, we see that in Aiken's work, importance is given to a need to possess mother rather than to a conflict with father over the mother. In fact, D. tries to copy his father, as he wanted to be a poet like his father. And D. tries to copy his father even in death. Aiken's father too committed suicide, and Aiken feels a "need of emulating him even in self-destruction?" (Aiken, Ushant 22). However, Aiken confesses that he did not want to die and hoped that he would be saved (he was saved by his wife).

Here we must remember that Aiken's father had shot Aiken's mother and then had committed suicide, and Aiken was the one who discovered the dead bodies and reported to the police. The consequences of this event were far-reaching. The impact of this tragedy on Aiken can be fully understood by reading Ushant, and we realize why it was necessary for Aiken to make this confession. Ushant does not only exorcise Aiken from the guilt of that childhood incident, rather, it frees Aiken of all the frustrations and guilt that he faced in his life



Aiken was described as "placeless" because throughout Ushant D. keeps shifting from America to England and then back to America. But this was because Aiken was in a dilemma as to where he really belonged. When he looks back at this dilemma he accepts that England had provided him with a sense of belongingness to the past; and now it was "New England's turn to bring that process of discovery up to date" (Aiken, Ushant 280).

Thus, while it was the childhood tragedy which did not allow Aiken to stay at one place, it was the desire to become like the "poet of White Horse Vale" which attracted him towards England, for England, according to D., was the land of poets and writers. However, Aiken at last, realizes that the journey to England or any other country will not give him solace. Only the journey into his own psyche will give him satisfaction, and "Ushant, as it has been translated from life, represents the final step in Aiken's journey towards that 'indecipherable land'" (Martin 237), the farthest level of consciousness.

The picture of the self that emerges in Aiken's fiction is that of a fragmented self. The self is torn by doubts about identity and about art. This is also borne out by a statement that Aiken once made that an artist always faces 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.

Though Aiken mainly used personal material, he attained a detachment which made his use of autobiographical material to rise above the subjectivity in his works.

Aiken may have altered his biographical material in his works not only unconsciously. He deleted material consciously too. For example, Ushant does not speak of Aiken's sister Elizabeth who lost her mental balance and had to be institutionalized. His silence shows that personal writings do not provide an absolutely truthful representation of the self. While Aiken took a cathartic advantage of literature, he did not give up the mask totally. Again when Aiken writes about places like Cambridge, Boston, Duxbury and Cape Cod, he tends to differ in his placing of some important monuments.

But we must remember that Aiken does not give to us an account of his life rather between fiction and non-fiction he presents a growth of his own personality through acceptance of certain facts of his life. For him there was a close relationship between self and writing, the act of writing helping him in self-understanding and in accepting his self in relation to his world.



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