

DUE LETTERE DI CONRAD AIKEN

A CURA DI ROSALIA RUFFINI

Durante la stesura della mia tesi di laurea su «La poesia di Conrad Aiken», sono entrata in contatto epistolare con lo stesso Aiken. La prima lettera che il poeta mi ha spedito è datata Brewster, 8-8-68, e non riveste un interesse particolare, in quanto Aiken si limita a darmi alcuni consigli ed indicazioni bibliografiche, e mi invita a scrivergli di nuovo se mi fosse sorto qualche problema. Incoraggiata gli riscrissi, ed ecco la risposta:

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Jan 8 69

Dear Miss Ruffini,

Thank you for your very good letter: I like the now design of the thesis much better¹, with some slight exceptions: I'd have put OSIRIS JONES along with PRELUDES etc., and perhaps RUBY as well, for they were all written more or less at the same time, and come out of the same set of preoccupations. But it doesn't much matter. As for The Tinsel Circuit², you may not

1. In un primo momento volevo trattare solo la prima poesia di Conrad Aiken, dal 1916 al 1925. Ne sottoposi lo schema ad Aiken, che mi consigliò la lettura di alcune opere critiche oltre alla sua autobiografia *Ushant: an Autobiographical Narrative*. In seguito, rcsami conto dell'interesse maggiore offerto dalle opere successive, alterai l'idea originaria, includendo nella tesi quasi tutta l'opera poetica di Aiken, dal 1916 al 1963.

2. «The Tinsel Circuit» è la seconda parte della ultima raccolta pubblicata da Aiken: *The Morning Song of Lord Zero*, Oxford, 1963. Poi-

have noticed that it is dated at the end, 1916-1961. Only one or two of the poems were ever published separately, I had always meant to revise them, and finally got round to it: I was just curious to see whether an antique could have the dust blown off it and brought to life, almost fifty years after. But no, it was not intended as in any way a conclusion: a mere variant. But the experiment was fascinating... As for west and east³: for one thing I do not attach any fixed meanings to them. In *LANDSCAPE*, it was natural to think of Eden itself as the east, from which any escape be to the west; that's all. (The angel who periodically tries to lure us *south*, and to safety, away from the unknown coasts of the west, is of course Eliot). Which brings us to your question about god⁴. I would have thought *USHANT* had answered that pretty extensively. It's all there, in the person of my grandfather, the Rev. William James Potter, a great liberal of the Unitarian church, in New Bedford, who preached Darwin and Humboldt rather than Christianity, and founded the Free Religious Association — he was one of the first to think of the ecumenical approach, and wanted a religion » purified of myth and dogma ». My poem *Hallowe'en* is about him, and quotes that and other remarks of his. So. I was brought up with No religion, except a sort of worship of him, which I shared with all New Bedford. And as I say in *USHANT* and elsewhere my credo could be put as a belief in the evolution of consciousness: this is all we know of god, and perhaps in this sense we are a *becoming* god. All the early religions were own crude creations,

ché tratta di un gruppo di attori da vaudeville, come *Turns and Movies*, del 1961, avevo chiesto al poeta se lo si poteva considerare come una conclusione alla sua opera poetica, simmetrica ad una delle prime opere.

3. Poiché il protagonista di « *The Pilgrimage of Festus* », 1923, alla fine del viaggio si siede a ripensare alla propria vita, guardando con rimpianto verso Ovest, e i personaggi di « *Landscape West of Eden* », 1934, si muovono verso ovest, avevo chiesto al poeta se attribuiva all'ovest lo stesso significato di Joyce, cioè di simbolo della vita, in contrapposizione all'est-morte.

4. La mia domanda era se credeva in un Dio appartenente a qualche religione positiva, e se no in che tipo di Dio credeva.

many of them explained in Otto Rank's *Myth of the Birth of the Hero* . . . In *USHANT*, again, you will find the Tsetse's joining of the church — you must have known he's Eliot — described with relish, but also with considerable shock and sorrow. He forgave me, I'm glad to say, and we remained the best of friends to the end. And are, still, with Valerie, his wife . . .

I'll be glad to write a few lines for the thesis⁵, after I've seen it! What can I say, otherwise —? And they'll have to be *typewritten*, as all my work has been since the mid-twenties or so! Send it along, and I'll do it. We're here till May, I think.

With best wishes for a Happy New Year
Sincerely

CONRAD AIKEN

— and to go back to east and west — in *THE KID*, you may have noticed, the critical and philosophical turning point comes when the west has been conquered, and now the movement is back to *the east*, where conquest of *mind* has been going on — and suddenly the heroes are thinkers and poets and writers: it is the east's turn!

— for more on god, take a look at *THEE*, a short poem published by Braziller (NY) a year ago: it has been described as both religious and anti-religious. And have you seen the paperback *COLLECTED CRITICISM*, Oxford, Galaxy Books? I think you should.

Appena la ebbi pronta, gli spedii la tesi; Aiken mi mandò una breve introduzione, accompagnata dalla seguente lettera:

5. Gli avevo chiesto di scrivermi qualche parola, possibilmente a mano, da mettere come introduzione alla tesi.

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Feb 28 69

Dear Miss Ruffini,

Thanks for your letter, and now the magnum opus. I HADN'T expected it to be in Italian, though I now realize it had to be, and it's sixty-old years since I last attempted to read Italian, but much to my surprise and relief, or perhaps because you write very lucidly, I managed very well. And, as I've said in my little introduction (you can call it what you like!), it IS very good. You make the mistake that almost all my thesis-writers — there have been a great many — and that Martin and Hoffman make also — of not allowing for the sheer monstrosity of the *corpus*, and use too much space on the early work, which stints you on the later — but never mind, you make up for it in the cogency of what you have to say. How good you are on the PRELUDES, LANDSCAPE, RUBY MATRIX, and LI PO, all vital links in the chain. But how did you miss THE CRYSTAL⁶? It sums up the mathematical, scientific, Pythagorean side and joins it, as it were, to the humanitarian, to complete the picture, and it is in some ways perhaps the final statement. (Parts of it were read at a meeting of scientists and math teachers at Univ. of Texas, as suggesting a meeting-ground for poetry and science). I must make this short, for I am not well, but one other small thing baffled me — you mention AND IN THE HANGING GARDENS as if were a group of poems, but it is one short narrative-lyric thing, and very popular to read aloud! . . . And thank you for giving me a great deal of pleasure!

CONRAD AIKEN

6. «The Crystal», in *Shepold Hill*, Sagamore Press, New York, 1945.