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## **► To cite this version:**

Marcin Stawiarski. ”Words and Music Boundaries: Conrad Aiken and his Ambiguous Musicality of Poetry”. *Comparatismi* , 2017, 10.14672/20171302 . hal-02266688

**HAL Id: hal-02266688**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02266688>**

Submitted on 15 Aug 2019

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Comparatismi II 2017

ISSN 2531-7547

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14672/20171302>

## Words and Music Boundaries: Conrad Aiken and his Ambiguous Musicality of Poetry

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**Abstract** • The American Modernist poet Conrad Aiken attempted not only a thematic rapprochement with music, but also what is usually described as ‘musicalization of fiction,’ that is to say a more formal type of intermediality. By this token, Aiken occupies a specific place in literary history as an author of formal musical borrowings. Yet, paradoxically, Aiken’s use of music remains rather conventional, or traditionalist, so that it only reinforces his marginality within the Modernist world. While Harold Bloom describes Aiken’s poetry as attached to the “tradition of High romanticism”, I would willingly describe his use of music as an orthodox musical mythography, whereby the crossing of the boundaries between the arts becomes a mere poetic tool, and quite a hackneyed intersemiotic translation. In other words, far from constituting a novelty, intermediality and intersemiotic translation are signs of an attachment to traditionalist values. Aiken’s musical singularity also appears in his novels which seem to have been initially conceived of as purely profitable projects, aiming to improve the poet’s income. However, to an extent, Aiken’s novels reflect his poetry, building on his intersemiotic poetic statements. Indeed, what comes to the fore, in both Aiken’s poetry and his novels, is an almost obsessive questioning of consciousness. And, it is music that plays a heuristic function accompanying images of consciousness. In order to demonstrate Aiken’s attachment to musical borrowings and his paradoxically traditionalist approach to intersemioticity, I will first focus on his poetic *manifestos*. Second, I shall concentrate on Aiken’s musical representations of consciousness, especially in his novel *Blue Voyage* (1927). Finally, I will refer to Aiken’s novels in relation to his vision of time as an aesthetic construct in keeping with music.

**Keywords** • Aiken; Music; Poetry; Musico-literary Intersemioticity

# Words and Music Boundaries: Conrad Aiken and his Ambiguous Musicality of Poetry

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## I. Introduction

“[B]ad egg, bad egg, say I to myself two hundred times a day, and four hundred times a night; bad egg, bad egg, and you know the queer thing is that I can’t very genuinely *despise* myself for being a bad egg” (*Selected Letters of Conrad Aiken* 127): this is how the American poet and novelist Conrad Potter Aiken describes himself in a desperate letter to a friend. The vision of a “bad egg” seems symptomatic of his marginal position as a poet from the 1920s until the 1970s. Born in 1889, in Savannah, Georgia, Aiken wrote poetry, novels, and short stories as well as criticism. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the Bollingen Prize, and a National Book Award. Friend of T.S. Eliot, John Gould Fletcher, or Malcolm Lowry, Aiken occupied a secondary place as a penniless, neglected artist, whose works never sold, but who closely collaborated with his contemporaries.

The poet was perfectly aware of his marginality as a writer on the American and European poetic scene and he took advantage of it. Writing far from the crowd seems to have been a way of achieving more liberty: “One is freer to grow and change, since one is not under a spotlight on a stage—one ceases to care so very much what people will think—thinks more personally and feels more personally precisely because one is alone” (Aiken, *Letters* 127). Aiken even goes as far as to distrust “recognition as unhealthy” (127). He seems to define deference to the mainstream as tantamount to running the risk of sacrificing part of one’s authenticity and originality.

But Aiken’s liminal place is not merely due to his lack of success or personal failure. There are other elements that are part and parcel of Aiken’s singularity as an author whom one might perceive today as a forgotten Modernist. On the one hand, it is Aiken’s use of music and his ubiquitous musical imagery that constitute a sign of a specific personal contribution to Modernist literature. In fact, it appears that Aiken resorts to music in his poetry in a very general and systematic way, so that his works are highly intermedial. It so happens that at first sight music is used as a source of poetic images, but one soon realizes that in some of his writings Aiken also used music in a more formal way, as though musical metaphors gave way to some sort of narrative structuring.

In other words, Aiken appears to have attempted not only a thematic rapprochement with music, but also what is usually described as “musicalization of fiction,” that is to say a more formal type of intermediality.<sup>1</sup> By this token, Aiken occupies a specific place in literary history as an author of formal musical borrowings. Yet, paradoxically, Aiken’s use of intermediality remains rather conventional, or even highly traditionalist, so that it only

<sup>1</sup> “[M]usicalization of literature’ points towards a presence of music in the signification of a text which seems to stem from some kind of transformation of music into literature. The verbal text appears to be or to become, to a certain extent, similar to music or to effects connected with certain compositions, and we get the impression of experiencing music ‘through’ the text. Hence the ‘musicalization of fiction’ is essentially a special case of covert intermedial imitation: the imitation of music in a narrative text” (Wolf 51).

reinforces his marginality within the Modernist world. While Harold Bloom described Aiken's poetry as attached to the "tradition of High romanticism" (Aiken, *Selected Poems* vii), I would willingly describe his use of music as a romantic and orthodox musical mythography.

Aiken's singular use of musical intermediality also appears in his novels, which seem to have been initially conceived of as purely profitable projects, intended to improve the poet's poor income. However, to an extent, Aiken's novels build on the intersemiotic ideas from his poems. What comes to the fore, in both Aiken's poetry and novels, is an almost obsessive questioning of consciousness through musical—thematic and structural—intermediality. Music is given a heuristic function, being seen as a natural cognate with consciousness.

In order to demonstrate Aiken's attachment to musical borrowings and to question his musical intermediality, I shall first focus on his poetic *manifestos*. Second, I shall concentrate on Aiken's musical representations of consciousness, especially in his novel *Blue Voyage* (1927). Finally, I will refer to Aiken's novels in relation to his vision of time as an aesthetic construct.

## 2. Aiken's Musical Manifestos

Aiken's prefaces to his poems may be considered as musico-literary manifestos, insofar as they resort to an astounding array of musical references as far as the theoretical and conceptual background is concerned. What I wish to demonstrate is that (a), from the point of view of poetic images, music constitutes an extremely abstract or even vague and highly conventional source of metaphors; (b) Aiken's example is a case of a substitutive, *detoured*, or even *misappropriated* intersemioticity; and (c) his poetic manifestos constitute a key to the reading of his novels.

Aiken writes prefaces accompanying the publication of his poetry. On the one hand, given that music in literature manifests itself frequently as programmatic, the interpretation of the musico-literary relation in Aiken seems to be largely dependent on a sort of authorial "pre-interpretation," a sort of musical programme which the writer himself establishes for the reading of his poems. One of the paradoxes of the "musicalization of fiction" is the difficulty one has in identifying musicalized texts without paratextual or extratextual statements. The main risk is that of falling prey to intentional or authorial fallacy.

Aiken writes six narrative poems between 1915 and 1920: "The Charnel Rose," "The Jig of Forslin," "The House of Dust," "Senlin: A Biography," "The Pilgrimage of Festus," and "Changing Mind." They all go by the name of "symphonies." The whole cycle is later called *The Divine Pilgrim*. By examining the prefaces to the narrative poems, one gets a grasp of what is meant by the *contrapuntal* and *symphonic* musical technique in Aiken's works.

It seems possible to speak of a form of misuse of musical forms in Aiken, or at least a *detour*. Intermediality is in fact characterized by a high degree of abstraction. Such generalization goes hand in hand with the representation of consciousness and the quest of the self, but makes it almost impossible to recognize and analyze any precise musical ideas or forms in Aiken's constant intersemiotic allusions.

In his preface to "The Charnel Rose," Aiken's use of a musical metaphor shows how abstract intermediality may be. The vagueness of expression is partly justified by the imperfection of extra-musical content in music: "Like program music, it is helped by a program: though concrete in its imagery, it avoids sharp statement of ideas; implying the theme, rather than stating it" (*Collected Poems* 865). The poem's expressive potential is

compared to musical expressiveness with regard to symbolism. Whereas meaning in music is doomed to remain dependent on evoking rather than denoting, so is Aiken's poetry according to the poet's own wish—an aesthetic of suggestiveness and indirectness. Somewhat paradoxically, the notion of abstraction remains akin to the literary definition of the theme, not the musical conception of it. If we consider that the main difference between the poetic and the "musical theme" (Escal 93-117) is that the former reveals the general (attributable to any work of art) and the latter the specific (attributable to one specific composer), Aiken's poetic statement implies the general rather than the specific, which clearly shows in his definition of such musical use of theme:

To exhaust such a theme would of course be impossible. One can only single out certain aspects of it . . . ; it has been my intention to merely use this idea as a theme upon which one might build wilfully a kind of absolute music. . . . Thus, beginning with the lowest order of love, the merely carnal, the theme leads irregularly, with returns and anticipations as in music, through various phases of romantic or idealistic love, to several variants of erotic mysticism; finally ending in mysticism apparently pure. (*Poems* 865)

What Aiken borrows from music is the already intersemiotic forms of musical expression. When music strives to tell a story or to represent something, it—programmatically—aspires to the literary theme. It would seem that Aiken attempted to capture the literary back from music as it were.

It is difficult to understand what is meant by "absolute" music that is usually understood as instrumental music, but it also signifies music as an idea here. This is how Bucknell, in his study of *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, defines "absolute music," by "its ability to express the sublime or inexpressible" (23). A sublimated conception of music characterizes Aiken's approach and the poet goes farther in his musical research by hinting at symphonic structures used in his works: "'The Charnel Rose' is called a symphony, and in some ways the analogy to a musical symphony is close. Symbols recur throughout like themes, sometimes unchanged, sometimes modified, but always referring to a definite idea" (Aiken, *Poems* 865).

Aiken's musical generalization is so general that it seems possible to assign this definition to any musical form. In Aiken's "symphonic poems," one will hardly find any mention of the sonata form, which lies at the heart of the classical symphony. Aiken's *symbol-theme* is first and foremost an abstract poetic entity related to time and the mutability of poetic material through time. Its musical origin may well be relevant, but its link to any real form of music seems arbitrary and barely identifiable.

Music constitutes a source of poetic metaphors linked to the flow of "the image-stream in the mind which we call consciousness" (Aiken, *Poems* 865). The preface to "The Charnel Rose" shows that the use of music in Aiken may have something to do with the "harmony of the spheres," as an abstract, or even mystical vision of musical proportions.<sup>2</sup>

In his preface to "The Jig of Forslin," Aiken insists on the novelty of his formalistic undertaking, which gives precedence to the interrelation between music and consciousness through temporal schemes submerging the protagonist's "emotional and mental hinterland . . . in flux." Music is supposed to give the text both a symphonic and a contrapuntal form—it is said to be "roughly in symphonic form" (*Poems* 866, 867; emphasis added).

"The House of Dust," which is described as "a symphonic poem about the city," deals with a general urban theme, a city "ancient or modern, it makes no difference" (Aiken, *Poems* 868). Consciousness is represented both through the urban typographic metaphor

<sup>2</sup> In relation to more ancient intersemiotic theories of music and literature interrelations, see Finney.

and the musical imagery as “something of its anonymous and multicellular identity, . . . which seems to be in effect the fusion or coalescing of the innumerable living particles that compose it” (869). The vision of multiplicity—foregrounding simultaneity and diversity both in music and the self—is conveyed through contrapuntal patterns: “But perhaps it would be as well to point out also that its theme is essentially contrapuntal: 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” (869). The representation of consciousness through the image of a time-dependent music/city is in keeping with Aiken’s sublimated conception of an organic consciousness: “the evolution of man’s consciousness, ever widening and deepening and subtilizing his awareness.” (869). As such, the temporality of consciousness chimes with multiple patterns, overlapping structures, variation, or repetition.

“Senlin,” too, aims at exploring consciousness and the poem is again described as a sort of “absolute music.” Here, the exploration of consciousness becomes an identity quest of an individual facing multiplicity (“for Senlin discovers not only that he is a whole gallery of people or personalities, rather than one . . .” [Aiken, *Poems* 870]). Quite in keeping with this, is “Changing Mind,” showing the individual as a fragmentary, multiple self, “in the process of seeing himself resolved into his constituent particles” (872). The notion of “evolving consciousness of man” (873) contrasts with the modern representation of a disintegrated self, “the apparent disintegration of the soul, or ego, with which modern psychology has confronted us” (872), and music seems to be a remedy to this disintegration.

In short, the musical images provide a series of epistemic metaphors of consciousness; they represent a model for psychological exploration, and that of the evolution of the self. When speaking about his symphonic/contrapuntal techniques used as formal templates in his cycles of poems, Aiken points to “the working of some complex . . . towards an architectural structure in poetry analogous to that of music, . . . a grouping towards symphonic arrangement, though it is exceedingly rudimentary . . .” (*Poems* 874).

Even though we are confronted with a vow of musicalization, Aiken keeps mentioning approximations, shortcuts, imprecision, or even errors and failure. Besides, one is clearly at a loss when pondering Aiken’s putting together symphony, counterpoint, and variation: “some way of getting contrapuntal effects in poetry—the effects of contrasting and conflicting tones and themes, a kind of underlying simultaneity in dissimilarity . . . dividing it into several main parts, and subdividing these parts into short movements . . .” (*Poems* 875).

Aiken’s very personal mixture of musical ideas fails to make intersemiotic sense. Dividing a text into parts and subparts does not make it any musical as such. The variety of “rapid changes of tone” which Aiken emphasizes in relation to symphonies (*Poems* 875) has no or little connection to music, where tone is defined as a hierarchical organization of sounds. For Aiken, tone is an evocation of emotion, “a music of which the chief characteristic is elusiveness, its fleetingness, and its richness in the shimmering overtones of hint and suggestion” (875). In other words, what Aiken defines as “the poetic method . . . called implication” (875) may well be any music, or none at all.<sup>3</sup>

By examining Aiken’s prefaces to his poems, one may be amazed at the all-pervasive musical references, but also at the fact that they remain extraordinarily vague and abstract.

<sup>3</sup> One might perceive in Aiken overtones of ancient relationships between tones and affects, such as are described by Winn: “The one important connection between musical theory and musical practice, and the one important resemblance between musical and rhetorical theory, was the doctrine of *ethos*, the claim that each of various *harmoniai* or modes had a definite psychological effect on any hearer” (22).

In my opinion, they can only be understood as a form of aspiration to the condition of music, and to the idea of vagueness of musical expressivity. According to Vladimir Jankélévitch, music signifies nothing and when it signifies it is an “inexpressive expression,” so that meaning is always *something else, something less, something more or less* (57). Such inexpressive signifying—semiosis as sheer presence—seems to be at the heart of Aiken’s idea of musico-literary intersemioticity: something which he calls pure “overtones of hint and suggestion” (*Poems* 875). Consequently, musicalization in Aiken is a partly avowed misappropriation of musical signs in literature.

### 3. Aiken’s Aesthetic Exploration of Consciousness

While Brad Bucknell contends that after Mallarmé, music can no longer be viewed as “the trope of a secure inwardness” (36), music still seems to play that function in Aiken. In Aiken’s works, the exploration of consciousness plays a major role, alluding to general psychological aspects of the Freudian theory. Interestingly, the question of consciousness is associated with a quest for forms and patterns, especially in terms of time structures for which music plays a crucial role as a source of formal analogies. In one of his novels, *Conversation* (1940), consciousness is pictured as a cloth made up of unrelated junks, like a rhapsody, represented through time’s flight within the ordinary, everyday context (*Collected Novels* 495, 491). In his short story, “Gehenna,” consciousness is depicted as a water-body trying to escape its milieu, whereas in “State of Mind” the human brain takes the form of the strange loop of a snake biting its tail (*Collected Short Stories*, 131, 277-78). Unknown and unknowable, consciousness appears like a fascinating animal, an odd creature within the human, as intangible as music.

In his autobiographical essay, *Ushant*, Aiken exposes singular time relations linking the wave-like movement of the ocean to the states of consciousness, whose components form a “pure fugue, the two themes, the two voices, pursuing and overtaking and overlapping each other, the twin and ambivalent themes or voices of sex and art” (164). In *Ushant*, Aiken also meditates on the articulation between language and consciousness, language and time, and above all the paradoxical search for formlessness. The poet writes:

So persistently musical for a time had been the preoccupation, in these attempts at shaping, that he had often wondered whether after all it might not have been the “musical” echo, in his inheritance from his father, . . . that he might more profitably have listened to: perhaps those piano lessons, . . . and it was not without interest to remember, too, that . . . he had actually begun to study . . . a handbook on counterpoint. (221)

Consciousnesses appears as an undecipherable construct—“a thousand-year-old palimpsest” (*Ushant* 323), i.e. a partly erased text, whose layers cannot be uncovered and where “new lines are wreathed on old lines half-erased” (“Palimpsest: The Deceitful Portrait”; *Selected Poems* 9). Hence, a strange and almost mystical pattern with which Aiken comes up:

a  
b  
a b c b a  
b  
a

Precedence is given to simultaneity, multi-directionality and networks, in order to “obtain a simultaneous view of all possible actions and at all possible times [a]s if the past, the present, and the future, were all presented at once, the single and the multiple, the important and the unimportant, the trivial and the tremendous . . .” (Aiken, *Ushant* 329).

Aiken puts to use his theories in *Blue Voyage*, one the five novels which he published and which represents a central text owing to its meta-fictional and self-reflexive turn. The question of genre stands at its forefront: Aiken is above all a poet, and he starts writing novels after years of poetic creativity. Writing a novel is a means of becoming more widely read as well as improving his income. Moreover, Aiken’s poetic manifestos rub off on his novelistic approach. Here, too, the text resorts to an exploration of the human psyche and music appears as a source of dynamic metaphors and temporal patterns. Both the counterpoint—as an image of simultaneity and plurality—and the symphony are perceived as organizational principles. Moreover, just as in his poems, the notion of *idée fixe*—the main idea around which other elements revolve—is also a recurrent structural feature.

Besides, *Blue Voyage* presents us with a meditation on Modernism. Joyce’s *Ulysses*, published in 1922, was a model for *Blue Voyage*, published in 1927. In Aiken’s text, Modernism is depicted through the spirit of competition. The main character is a playwright who dreams of establishing a new literary school: “Murder equals *redrum*. That’s poetic justice. I waste a lot of time in logolatry. I am a verbalist, Cynthia—a tinkling symbolist. I am the founder and leader of the new school of literature—The Emblemists” (Aiken, *Novels* 90). This constitutes an ironic commentary on Pound, Vorticism, or Imagism. The protagonist seeks a musical effect in literature: “O God, if I could only get that sort of effect in a play” (24). What seems interesting is that other texts at that time raise similar questions of intersemiotic relationships. *Blue Voyage* is published in the United States on 22 June 1927 (it had come out 2 months before in London). The same year sees the publication of *Aspects of the Novel* by E.M. Forster, in which Forster wonders whether it is possible to somehow *musicalize* the novel or get some kind of musical effect in literature: “Is there any effect in novels comparable to the effect of the *Fifth Symphony* as a whole, where, when the orchestra stops, we hear something that has never actually been played?” (149). In 1928, a protagonist in Aldous Huxley’s *Point Counter Point* refers to the “musicalization of fiction,” defining it: “Not in the symbolist way, by subordinating sense to sound, . . . but on a large scale, in the construction” (293). Three years before, the French writer André Gide had already envisaged transposing Bach’s *Art of Fugue* into a text in his *Counterfeiters* (1925). All these intersemiotic undertakings draw on the temporal potential of music. When Huxley describes a concert, he emphasizes the polyphonic capacity to present several voices at a time:

The parts live their separate lives; they touch, their paths cross, they combine for a moment to create a seemingly final and perfected harmony, only to break apart again. Each is always alone and separate and individual. “I am I,” asserts the violin; “the world revolves round me.” “Round me,” calls the cello. “Round me,” the flute insists. . . . In the human fugue there are eighteen hundred million parts. (23)

Such contrapuntal simultaneity is put to use in Aiken’s *Blue Voyage* where polyphony appears as a token of some universal poly-vocal complexity:

A universe that contained everything—all things—yet said only one word: “I”. A music, an infinite symphony, beautifully and majestically conducting itself there in the darkness, but remaining forever unread and unheard. . . . And this universe sees another, far off, unattainable, and desires passionately to approach it, to crash into it—why? . . . A steaming universe

of germ cells, a maelstrom of animal forces, of which he himself, his personality, was only the collective gleam. (*Novels* 24)

The similarity between the two quotes is striking. Both emphasize polyphonic structures and the mutual inaccessibility of voices or layers.

But then, such impossibility is what the author in *Blue Voyage* tries to resolve, deploring the difficulty to represent simultaneity of consciousness, so much so that the literary text seems to be a falsification of it: “Impossible to present, all at once, in a phrase, a sentence, a careful paragraph—even in a book, copious and dishevelled—all that one meant or all that one was. To speak is to simplify, to simplify is to change, to change is to falsify” (*Novels* 64). The object of representation seems to exceed the medium of representation. In other words, music seems to allow simpler means of representing the human psyche, thus aspiring to the condition of music means getting closer to the condition of consciousness. The quest of forms in an attempt to represent formlessness seems obvious in the use of the writer-character in Aiken. Demarest, the main character, seeks formalism:

O God that strange mixture of the soaring melody, so perfect in its pure algebra, and the sad, persistent meditative voice . . . Then the piano melody, finishing delicately and ethereally by itself. . . O God, if I could only get that sort of effect in a play—not melodramatically, or with stained glass windows and paper snow, but naturally and simply by that superb use of counterpoint of feeling and thought. (*Novels* 98)

This self-reflexive passage appears as a plead for intersemiotic transposition, suggesting that the interior monologue is actually structured on musical formalism which fails to come to light.

Aiken questions language and its potential as an artistic medium, coveting the condition of music. In one of his poems, in the collection *Time in the Rock*, published in 1966, one finds such self-reflexive intersemiotic questioning of poetry:

Music will more nimbly move  
than quick wit can order word  
words can point or speaking prove  
but music heard.  
How with succession it can take  
time in change and change in time [...]   
but verse can never say these things. (*Poems* 159)

*Blue Voyage* is a quest for identity and for patterns aspiring to represent consciousness. The story is told through different techniques such as the interior monologue, the epistolary genre, and psychoanalytical dialogue. The polyphonic template lies in the association between the sea, the consciousness and some sort of ideal, absolute music: “What was this singular mechanism in him that wanted so deliberately, so consciously, to break itself? . . . depth beyond depth, a universe chorally singing” (*Novels* 24). Music becomes an extended metaphor: “A universe that contained everything—all things—yet said only one word: ‘I’. A music, an infinite symphony, beautifully and majestically conducting itself . . . but remaining forever unread and unheard” (24). The abstract fluid universe of the sea has something to do with the music of the spheres, an abstract entity, founded on proportions and divine ordering: the *musica humana* echoing the *musica mundana*.

Such abstract metaphor seems to tally with universal symbolism, whereby music becomes illustrative of humanity: “An extraordinary reflection on the deep pluralism of things, life’s contrapuntal and insoluble richness!” (Aiken, *Novels* 156); “chimed together

in unison”; “I too participated in this gentle diapason, this tranquil sounding of the familiar notes”; “the beautiful harmony” (157). Consciousness is paralleled with some enigmatic ordering, different from objective time and reality. Like the musical counterpoint, it is composed of numerous voices, mirroring the complexity of universe: “The corposants are five celestial voices, singing in the tops of the trees. They ululate softly in chorus, while the treetops thresh in the wind, as the mad nymphs ululated when Dido and Aeneas fled into the cave from the thunder” (138). Listening to consciousness becomes “listening to this heavenly music” (141) or some “subconscious harmony” (145). But then, what should be emphasized is the very lexical field predicated on the notions of unity, tunefulness, and harmony (“unison,” “diapason,” etc.).

It is noteworthy that in Aiken, disorder or disharmony are seldom made use of. Whereas the notion of dissonance, as was demonstrated by Daniel Melnick,<sup>4</sup> is frequently used in Modern writers to convey an experience of disintegration and destructuring, in Aiken’s poems, the predominant mode is not dissonance, but, the traditional consonance: a harmonious, mystical and universal sort of ordering predicated on the idea of “absolute music.” It is from this abstract sublimation of musical harmoniousness that spring the structural patterns in Aiken’s novels. Consciousness is seen as revolving around a limited series of scenes and images. And such repetitiveness is not out of keeping with musical cyclical forms, such as the lied. The paradox of such musico-literary relationship is that a highly organized type of pattern is used to convey the highly unstructured universe of consciousness. It is through the patterning of consciousness that dissonance and unfamiliarity are kept at bay.

#### 4. Musical Time as Aesthetic Experience

Whereas *Blue Voyage* constitutes a perfect instance of Aiken’s use of musical metaphors with regard to the representation of consciousness, another example of the poet’s use of intersemiotic structural metaphors is his vision of time. Time in Aiken turns into an aesthetic experience as a specific intermedial presence, which may be apprehended as a pattern correlated to the exploration of consciousness. One of the most easily perceptible musical patterns is polyphony, which characterizes texture, that is to say the number of voices or the density of elements in a composition.

Aiken resorts to a dense, contrapuntal structuring in some of his stories. In “Round by Round” (*Collected Short Stories* 236-44), for instance, three different temporalities—the past, the present and the future—are made to regularly alternate, giving the reader a sense of simultaneous deployment of time layers. A similar technique is used in another story, “A Man Alone at a Lunch” (*Collected Short Stories* 371-77), where a character is shown through a fragmentary “under-conversation,” which gives a sense of an atomized self, hovering between the intimate self and the public self.

Other patterns come into play. *A Heart for the Gods of Mexico* (1939) confronts the individual with a broader sense of temporality, that of a mythical and ancestral time. The

<sup>4</sup> “In the early 20th century, dissonance becomes the single most effective language music can speak in a century of disequilibrium like the one now ending. When modern novelists undertake the musicalization of fiction, their efforts lead not to the writing of harmonious, self-consciously beautiful musical prose, but rather to the use of a series of experimental, destabilizing strategies, which, under the guise of musicalization, assume and achieve the effect of dissonance in the novel” (Melnick, *Fullness of Dissonance, Modern Fiction and the Aesthetics of Music* 8).

novel's plot revolves around three characters, Blomberg, Noni, and Gil, who leave for Mexico, where Noni will die of heart failure. But the teleological temporality of death is undermined by other types of temporality—the time of musical multiplicity as well as mythical time. The novel gives precedence to a multiply-directed time,<sup>5</sup> i.e. a temporal pattern made up of displacements and multifarious time structures whose finalities are multiple, scattered, dispersed. Here, too, the reader is presented with a musical metaphor:

Strange counterpoint; for somehow he felt that while she thus held fixed before her, embodied in himself, the past, and explored it lovingly and deeply, she was also aware of the rushing and violent present, fluid beneath and around them, and the future, toward which the train was speeding, unknown but already as fixed and marmoreal as the past. (Aiken, *Novels* 445)

The relationship between the characters translates into a form of musical polyphonic structure, implying “the complications of texture with which they were woven” (Aiken, *Novels* 435). Time becomes “time with a hundred hands, time with a thousand mouths!” (459), that is time the multiplier, time the devourer.

The novel emphasizes the temporality of dispersal by means of the musical reference to Haydn's *Symphony n°45 in f sharp minor*, Hob.I:45, aka the “Farewell symphony.” Written in 1772 for Prince Nicolas Esterhazy, who kept his resident musicians too long, the symphony resorts to a form of staged act of farewell, whereby the musicians leave the orchestra pit one by one blowing the candles at the music stands, so that at the end there are only two violinists left. This performative metaphor seems to be applicable to the novel's structuring of both distance and gradual dispersal. A symbolic parallel between Haydn's symphony and the text is said to operate because the voyage is perceived as an aesthetic experience, comparable to that work:

I think it's wonderful, it's like the creation of a work of art, a piece of superb music. . . . She's taking this pitiful little tag-end of her life, . . . and making of them, and of us—herself and Gil and me—a farewell symphony; like that one of Haydn's which you probably don't know. . . . [W]here, as the orchestration thins, towards the end, the different sections of the orchestra rise, as soon as they finish their parts, and go quietly out, and the lights in the hall are extinguished one by one, to the last note and the last light. . . . I'm being used like Gil, in the making of a piece of music; I'm being used; and if nothing else ever happens to me again in all my life, this will have been enough to justify it, and to give it dignity. . . . (Aiken, *Novels* 429)

The novel seems to build its time constructions and symbols on this final notion of scattering, as is suggested by Haydn, where teleology and wholeness are subverted.

In *Great Circle* (1933), the references to music—such as Mozart's *Magic Flute*, K.620 (1791), *Rose Cavalier*, op.59 (1911) by Richard Strauss or Prokofiev's *Love of Three Oranges*, op.33 (1919)—share the common ground of comedy or satire. The plot of the novel revolves around a conquest of a woman and jealousy: on finding out that his wife falls in love with another, the protagonist decides to embark on a voyage in order to confront the

<sup>5</sup> Kramer defines this type of musical temporality as follows: “There is a sense of motion, but the direction of that motion is anything by unequivocal. Multiply-directed time is not the same as non-directed linear time. In the former, the sense of goal-orientation is acute, even if more than one goal is implied and/or more than one route to the goal(s) is suggested. In nondirected linear time there is no clearly implied goal, despite the directed continuity of motion. A graphical analogy (comparable to a straight line for goal-directed linear time or a meandering line for nondirected linear time) for multiply-directed time would be a multidimensional vector field.” (Kramer, 1988, 46).

two lovers. After a series of failures, the character arrives at a form of epiphany whereby he decides to turn over a new leaf and lead his life wifeless, by which he claims to gain a superior awareness of nothingness and a heightened sense of masculinity.

The symbol of the cycle is one of the major patterns to which the novel resorts by means of constantly turning back to the point of departure. Opera and theatricality are here the major intermedial references, with extended metaphors and structural patterns such the image of the metaphor of the duet: “Perhaps they were only playing duets. Side by side on the long mahogany bench, leaning together, leaning apart, Tom the bass and Bertha the treble, the Haydn Surprise, the Drum-roll Symphony . . . We’ll start at G in the second bar. Haydn duet, hide and do it” (Aiken, *Novels* 172).

Polyphony is a core source of patterns. Here too, the protagonist’s interior monologue is “the chorus of changing voices and faces” (Aiken, *Novels* 174). Psychoanalysis is directly staged in chapter III, where the duet is the dialogue between the protagonist and another character who decides to analyze the former through “the Freudian technique of the colorless and dispassionate auditor” (269). Fragmentation and repetition prevail. One of the clichés that the reader is presented with is the association between Eros and Thanatos—on the one hand, with the structuring of the *dance macabre*, associating seduction with death, showing the absurdity of and disillusionment with love; on the other, with reference to Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, in particular the *Liebestod* (*Tristan und Isolde*, WWV.90 [1865], 3: 3) (“Oh, yes, many’s the time I’ve played the ‘Liebestod’ there . . .” [Aiken, *Novels* 262]).

Toward the climax of the novel, the protagonist goes to a concert, which is the opening of Mozart’s *Magic Flute*. Such ending presents us with both a musical *ekphrasis* and a form of imitation of the music with which the passage deals. The very structure of the scene undermines linearity by imitating the fugal overture of Mozart’s *Magic Flute*. Mozart’s composition begins with an *adagio*, followed by a fugal *allegro*, the global structure being *ABA’B’*. Aiken’s text here is an alternating system between the programme notes which the protagonist reads (*A*), the character’s perception of music (*B*) and his thoughts on Bertha (*C*), arriving at a relatively regular alternating pattern between *A*, *B* and *C*. The musical *ekphrasis* mentions both the fugal technique and the Masonic chords in Mozart: “The Masonic chords again, ascending, altered, but with the same deep sadness; as of trains crying to each other across a wilderness at night; . . . and then again the lovely quick fugue, the elf dance, rising and rising to broader and bolder sweeps of sound, the intricate and algebraic pattern” (Aiken, *Novels* 292).

Another such formal example is to be found in *King Coffin* (1935), a novel drawing on both Freud’s and Nietzsche’s ideas revolving around the interior vagaries of Jasper Ammen, who plans to commit a murder. Smacking of Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov, the text stages a form of pre-crime emotional itinerary. In fact, no crime will be committed but the hero considers committing suicide. Music, once again, proves to be one of the structural sources as both a form of psychoanalytical apparatus and a template for forms and techniques.

The exploration of consciousness operates through self-scrutiny and not through interaction. The subject observes himself and conducts what is referred to as a form of “counteranalysis” (Aiken, *Novels* 322). Jasper sees himself both as a victim and as an *Übermensch*, a Nietzschean superman towering over the world, “from his own tower of vision he looked down at the sordid little human maze” (332). The rest of the world—“[t]hese subhumans, these chattering apes” (382)—thus deserve to die. The subject is singled out. He plans murder as a set of subsequent “dislocations,” which are supposed to provide a

series of formulae: “Formula found, dislocation number six... Superb. With each little accretion of definition the situation became tighter” (322). The plot gradually gains precision, and so does the murder scheme, but the ultimate “dislocation” prevents the super-subject from gaining control of his own life and achieving his goal.

The murder scheme is seen as a work of art which makes time palpable: it is self-projection within a context of a coherent time-abiding whole with a final, teleological resolution—the prospect of the pulling of the trigger, dramatizing time precision, materializing into shapes and patterns: “It was time made intensely audible, time made visible, time solidified in a concrete series of individual shapes—a slow-motion of time, almost in fact a ‘still’ . . .” (Aiken, *Novels* 408). Within the context of this aesthetic project, the victim is part of the work “in the process of becoming an artifact . . .” (363). The pattern the protagonist attempts to get hold of is “of Bachlike perfection, it was the ideal counterpoint of good and evil . . .” (331). The perfect proportions and its almost-mathematical abstraction are evoked too: “an action could have the purity of a work of art. I could be as abstract and absolute as a problem in algebra . . .” (363). The musical structure of Bach’s fugal technique is alluded to, all the more so as the system of mirroring may be assimilated to a contrapuntal use of musical *imitation*. The characters seem strangely interconnected, as if they were voices within a polyphonic work of art: “as if, in fact, they were somehow connected, were two parts of a single mechanism . . .” (383). Moreover, the idea of a chase/flight—that is the etymological origin of the term *fugue*—seems emphasized within the lexical field in the text: “It’s a flight from himself, from his loneliness” (317); “the flight from the box, from the theatre . . .” (385); “The impulse to take flight had been sharp enough, he had wanted to hurry out again at once, to go anywhere . . .” (399). The whole structure is illustrative of a mechanism of chase and pursuit: “But if this was true, and if Jones could really escape, it was also true that this new development had subtly altered the situation, the equation had been multiplied by an unknown quantity, the simple was becoming complex . . . It had the merit of a pure perfection, stood off by itself . . .” (384-85). The murder premeditation becomes “an amusing contrapuntal device in time, a synchronization of the impossible . . .” (392). And all the events become components of the overarching evolving clockwork masterminded by an aesthetic consciousness.

## 5. Conclusion

Aiken’s works evince a systematic correspondence between musical techniques and literary techniques. Intermediality never goes as far as to risk compromising the very coherence of literary discourse. The exploration of consciousness in Aiken is conducted through a frequent resort to musical forms and metaphors of those forms. They seem illustrative of the temporalities that lie behind psychic phenomena. But then, what is remarkable is that musical techniques in Aiken are all perfectly attuned to an ideal of absolute music and allusions are exclusively made to classical or late romantic music. No instance of modern music is to be found in Aiken—the deconstruction of the classical tonality in early 20th-century music would have provided a totally different, more dissonant visions of musicality and would have constituted a more modern metaphor of consciousness. By carefully keeping modern music at bay, Aiken keeps dissonance at a distance and builds a protective screen against modernity. Music in Aiken constitutes a detoured and ambiguous view of

Modernist culture,<sup>6</sup> where the intersemiotic dimension is used to stand for a sublimated ideality of traditional consonance as well as a means of taming the Modernist visions of dissonance.

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<sup>6</sup> But then, the ambiguous stance towards music in Modernist works is far from being rare, as is clearly stated by Bucknell: "Thus, behind the prevalent nineteenth-century conception of music as the highest of art forms, possessing, as Pater contended, an exquisite balance between 'form and content' there also lurks the sense that the realm toward which music tends may also be one of disturbing plenitude or excess . . . Music or the idea of music can be seen, then, as a less than ideal paradigm of art, an ambiguous position which I believe it remains for many writers of the twentieth century" (Bucknell 24).