

## Outsider at the Heart of Things: Essays

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OUTSIDER AT THE HEART OF THINGS

vites and commands general response reinforced and provisioned by the reader's own alien local knowledge. A "local habitation and a name" are among our most precious objects; possessed and tended they make a faith possible.

These remarks about Aiken's Boston and Cambridge would be an idle if agreeable commonplace if they were not, as I think, in analogy to the intense intimacy of his local knowledge and the flood of creative observation in the psychological territory—the strangely inhabited inscapes—of his novels. I do not mean that Aiken gives us the soul of Boston and Cambridge, only that he has a psychic territory—among many possible ones—of his own in which we find some part of ourselves, I will not say at home but in motion. We are in the two territories together, and as our awareness of one affects our awareness of the other, so the two territories act mutually upon each other's contours. They place each other and the place is a new place, and a place which is changing every minute. Every stop turns out to be a way station which we will reach again tomorrow or next year or in some more ancient repetition of pattern of memory and expectation than we yet know.

The place is changing every minute, whether in Cambridge or in the way stations of the psyche; and indeed the names of the novels insist on the change: *Blue Voyage*, *Great Circle*, *King Coffin*, *A Heart for the Gods of Mexico*, *Conversation*. All invoke journeys, and no pause may be more than a sojourn. Even a conversation, to be a good one, must be the intimate constant change in the exchanges of the speakers; the weaving of the inconsequential along the consequent pattern. The form is very old in our accounts of the novel. It is the combination of the form with the material that makes the innovation. The form is the picaresque, the material that of psychology, or the conditions of life which a particular psychology points at. Let us call the combination the Psychological Picaresque; it may not be the right name (for the right name is always receding, always secret), but it is an indication of what goes on in these novels. Depending on how your mind bends you will say either that you have in each of them a picaresque of conscience streams or, which I take to be the lesser mode, a picaresque of the stream of consciousness. Conscience would seem the better term because there is always in these novels a striking together, a clutching together, even if there is not a uniting, of what is known. It is conscience not consciousness that can make or follow a pattern; and it is conscience that estimates the lies we tell in our search for the truth of self or love in our blue voyage along the great circle of conversation. One does not know if it is the voyage or the great circle that never ends.

In *Blue Voyage* we have as windows to love and to the self, the psychology

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