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"The Delicious Progress": Whiteness as An Atavism In Conrad Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow"

The world was warm and white when I was born:
Beyond the windowpane the world was white,
A glaring whiteness in a leaded frame,
Yet warm as in the hearth and heart of light,
Although the whiteness was almost and was bone
In midnight's still paralysis, nevertheless
The world was warm and hope was infinite,
All things would come, fulfilled, all things would be known
All things would be enjoyed, fulfilled, and come to be my own.

Delmore Schwartz

The German philosopher Heidegger, thinking of the immense human endeavor in which we construct and maintain a consistent world of existing, revealed things out of the pure potential of Being, once remarked that the act of waking from sleep must surely constitute the single greatest miracle of human life; for within a fraction of a second after our being "dead to the world," that world reassembles itself before our eyes and senses in its familiar form and retains its customary regularity. Inspired by an understanding of the phenomenological import of awakening similar to Heidegger's, the French critic Georges Poulet (Miller, 1983) has sought to explore the world's literature in search of passages describing moments of awakening, hoping to gain thereby an understanding of the "interior distance" of those writers who created such passages.

Conrad Aiken's famous short story "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" is, of course, such a tale of awakening. Even the story's autobiographical source, Aiken has explained, lay in his own memories of childhood experiences of awakening (Martin, 1962). The "Snow" of the story's title, the all-encompassing whiteness into which Paul Hasleman descends completely at the close, first presents itself to him in all its "beauty ... beyond speech ... beyond thought" (221) one morning just after awakening when he realizes within his own tacit awareness of his world that the approaching steps of the mailman cannot be heard as far away as normally.

He cannot be heard, Paul begins to think, because snow has fallen, without his realizing it, during the night, thereby muffling the mailman's footsteps until he is already) close by. But leaving his bed to look out his window, Paul finds that no snow has actually fallen. The steps of the mailman are obscured rather, as Paul soon recognizes, by the "delicious progress" of air inner snowfall that marks Paul's submergence into

schizophrenic withdrawal from the familiar, public world of school, neighborhood, and parents by which he feels himself besieged.

"This is your house," Aiken explains in one of his poems; "On one side there is darkness, on one side there is light," and he is clearly thinking of the human skull. In "*Silent Snow*, *Secret Snow*," Paul Hasleman moves back and forth between these two realms, but his movement is no "delicious progress." For although Paul finds his secret whiteness a kind of miraculous gift, it is in reality a regress--the penetration and permeation of that light which lies ordinarily without the skull into the inner darkness of his consciousness until it engulfs it, The snow, the whiteness of Paul's madness is, in fact, an atavism.

The first time we see light, the French philosopher Condillac once noted, "we are it rather than see it" (Zuckerlandl, 1956, 342). The results of the first successful cataract operation performed in this century confirm Condillac's observation. Men and women, blind since birth, after their operations were able to look out upon the world for the first time, and although they were primarily adults, with years of nonvisual experience already behind them, few were able to recognize anything familiar; most were unable to distinguish objects, or even to see space at all. Some believed a house a mile away to be close by. like a child who reaches for the moon he takes to be within his reach. One girl could see only "a lot of different kinds of brightness," most were unable to see anything but a "confusion of forms and colors." A young man claimed that he witnessed only an "extensive field of light, in which everything appeared dull, confused, and in motion." Marius von Senden (1932), who collected the accounts of these cases of new vision in his book *Space and Sight*, observed that the perceptions of these individuals were not, however, really atypical, strange as they may seem, for each went through only "the experience that we all go through and forget, the moment we are born."

In "*Silent Snow*, *Secret Snow*," Paul returns to that "extensive field of light" into which he and all seers have been born in order to escape the double bind of his enviroing world. His regression is--as is typical in schizophrenia--a retreat along the line of development that brought him to his current impasse, but Paul, unlike most, goes all the way back, entirely deconstructing his experience. Schizophrenia, R. D. Laing has explained, is "a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation" (126). It is a response to being "checkmated" by the circumstances of one's life that inaugurates a kind of journey "back through one's personal life, in and back and through and beyond into the experience of all mankind, of the primal man, of Adam and perhaps even further into the beings of animals, vegetables and minerals" (Laing 126). All those embarking on such a voyage are bound to feel immense confusion, but it is essential for them to remember, Laing notes, "that they have been there before." Paul, too, has "been there before." He is a "flower becoming a seed" (Aiken 235), regressing into an atavistic state.

Initially, Paul's perception is acute; he is highly observant and shows fine visual

discrimination. He notices, for example, the minute features of small freckles on the neck of the girl who sits in front of him in school even after the first onslaught of the snow, and even later, on his walk home from school, he sees everything in great detail, from the texture of the garden wall he passes, to the shapes of small twigs, to the tracks of a dog still visible in a sidewalk. But he witnesses these things, these "items of mere externality," with indifference and a "merely tolerant eye" (223-225). For the whiteness of the coming snow calls him away from these things; it is a temptation impossible to resist. It teases "at the corners of his eyes" (at the periphery of his vision, where memory and rationality--the powers that daily resurrect the familiar world of objects from oblivion--cannot make themselves as readily available as in focal perception) and makes even the sunlight "snow-laden" (226).

Paul's mother, ironically enough, wonders if Paul's increasing absent-mindedness is due to eyestrain and, in a sense, it is. But Paul's preference for whiteness does not necessarily stem from weakness. Paul delights in the snow's coming precisely because of its capacity for "hiding the ugly" (220) and because in it he finds beauty and mystery far surpassing the "arranged light" of his home environment. In his *The World Through Blunted Sight*, the ophthalmologist Patrick Trevor-Roper tells the story of a man named Sidney Bradford, who, after gaining his sight for the first time at the age of 52, became despondent over the ugliness of the world (the sight of flaking paint could send him into deep depressions) and died in misery. And man)· of the cataract patients von Senden studied found ordinary vision similarly depressing. One even threatened to tear out his eyes if he wasn't sent back to the asylum. Most felt deeply "the rapid and complete loss of that striking and wonderful serenity which is characteristic only of those who have never yet seen." Paul Hasleman, however, has "seen" all his life, and the darkness that he seeks, when it finally overwhelms him, comes in "long white waves" (234). In his *Politics of Experience*, R. D. Laing has noted that today, immediate experience of, in contrast to belief or faith in, a spiritual realm of demons, spirits, Powers, Dominions, Principalities, Seraphim and Cherubim, the Light, is even more remote. As domains of experience become more alien to us, we need greater and greater open-mindedness even to conceive of their existence.

Paul knows that no one in his immediate world possesses such open-mindedness and that only he can appreciate the delicacy of his secret. He thinks it outrageous to even share it with those uncomprehending and immune-to-mystery adults who surround him, checkmating his wonder. But what Paul sees, it should be remembered, although it seems like madness to the modern mind, was once a sought after vision; a large percentage of the world's famed mystics has, at one time or another, experienced a vision of whiteness as a revelation of God's glory.

In the lore of Hasidic Judaism, for example, Martin Buber tells us, can be found mention of a phenomenon known as the "first light" which is the true source of all wisdom;

Before the soul enters the air of this world, it is conducted through all the worlds. Last of all, it is shown the first light which

once--when the world was created--illuminated all things, and which God removed when mankind grew corrupt. Why is the soul shown this light? So that, from that hour on, it may yearn to attain the light, and approach it rung by rung in its life on earth. And those who reach it, the *zaddikim*, into them the light enters, and out of them it shines into the world again. That is the reason why it was hidden. (38)

Paul Hasleman is best understood, it seems to me, as a failed *zaddikim*: the "first light" does not so much enter him as he enters it, and he does not attain it "rung by rung" but only through a backward leap. He stands in relation to it as a kind of black hole; the light remains within him and does not shine out again into the outer world to become a common possession. But his death is, in a sense, heroic. He seeks it; he even feels every step of its "delicious progress" and consciously prefers it to the death-in-life he sees around him. And in an age in which--as Ivan Illich in his *Medical Nemesis*, has predicted--obituaries will soon be written in the passive voice, to do that is a kind of heroism.

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