



## **Ethical Conversation with the Other in Conrad Aiken’s “Silent Snow, Secret Snow”: A Levinasian Reading**

Mohammadreza Touzideh<sup>1</sup> and Farshid Nowrouzi Roshnavand<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*MA in English Language and Literature, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran, ORCID: 0000-0001-9025-7974  
Email: m.touzideh@azaruniv.ac.ir*

<sup>2</sup>*Corresponding author: Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran, ORCID: 0000-0002-5338-7785  
Email: f.nowrouzi@umz.ac.ir*

### **Abstract**

The ethical relation with the Other becomes of great significance in the postmodern ethos which considers the decentralization of subjectivity as one of its main philosophical and literary objectives. Emmanuel Levinas was one of the first philosophers who redefined the notion of ethics as a critical moment in which the subject’s encounter with the Other solely occurs through the use of ethical language, a mode of communication that essentially escapes any form of totalization in favor of the subject’s consciousness. Such an ethical meeting with the Other can be traced in Conrad Aiken’s short story “Silent Snow, Secret Snow,” which narrates the twelve-year-old protagonist’s encounter with the mysterious voice of snow. The results of the study show that the protagonist, once exposed to the speaking face of the Other, initiates an ethical conversation with it and, in so doing, loses his subjectivity to the ethical manifestation that the Other issues upon him.

*Keywords:* Emmanuel Levinas, ethics, ethical language, subject, the Other, Conrad Aiken

### ARTICLE INFO

Research Article

Received: Thursday, September, 2, 2021

Accepted: Friday, April 15, 2022

Published: Sunday, May 1, 2022

Available Online: Friday, April 15, 2022

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2022.27397.1347>

Online ISSN: 2821-0204; Print ISSN: 2820-8986



© The Author(s)

## **Introduction**

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, literary and philosophical discourses have shifted their focus from the de-construction of subject and the Other to the re-construction of the identity of the Other and the question of ethics, a trend which can easily be traced in such literary approaches as feminism, postcolonialism, queer studies, disability studies, etc. This turn toward ethics has also been underlined by Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian-born French philosopher (1906-1995), who once again revives the matter in his philosophy, a subject which had long been forgotten because of the calamities brought about by the outbreak of the two world wars.

Touching upon the relationship between the subject and the Other and how it is related to the concept of ethics, Levinas states,

the calling into question of the same - which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same - is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. (1969, p. 43)

Thereupon, Levinasian ethics insists on a mode of ethics without any ethical foundation; it is a way of approaching the Other on the basis of responsibility in the reception of the Other. The Levinasian Other thence would be an undisclosable entity that escapes all the limitations within which the subject seeks to enclose it since the Other comes from a dimension of infinity that always already overflows my consciousness as a subject. Therefore, the subject's relation with the Other is enacted only as an ethical conversation which takes place in an encounter with the face of the Other.

Drawing on Levinas's notion of the ethics and his appreciation of the Other, the present paper analyzes "Secret Snow, Silent Snow," a short story by Conrad Aiken, to show how an ethical encounter between Paul, the protagonist, and the Other results in the absolute subordination of the subject once he is exposed to the speaking face of the Other. In so doing, the paper focuses on the language of the Other as an interruption that puts sovereignty of the subject under question. The next part outlines a brief review of the existing scholarship on the short story.

## **Literature Review**

Aiken's short story has already been analyzed from different perspective. Graham (1968) reads the work as a poem and refers to its lyric symbolism, particularly reflected in the image of the snow, and to its apt employment of alliteration among other poetic devices. Slap and Slap consider Paul to be ill and attribute his abnormal behavior to "his realization of his parents' sexual activity" (1980, p. 2). Likewise, Perkins maintains in a short review that Paul's retreat into his inner self symptomizes his "advanced schizoid personality," deciding that his disorder is sexually rooted (1962, p. 47). Swan (1989) investigates the role of silence in the short story and also in an earlier poem by Aiken called "Senlin: A Biography," pointing that in both works, silence and the silent represent "the neglected component of human reality" (p. 41).

Werlock (2010) calls the narrative a horror story in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe, citing Aiken's deep interest in psychology and his father's madness as his possible inspirations for writing this work. To Tressin (1966), the short story allegorizes the plight of a creative, artistic, introverted, and sensitive mind in a philistine, middle-class society where the "daydreaming" protagonist is seriously misunderstood. Stevenson uses Gestalt psychology to explain Paul's condition, which he calls snow-blindness; the protagonist is not able to see anymore because he has turned his eyes "towards the whiteness of the skull's bony interior, looking at the inside of his own head" (2004, p. 67). All these analyses are valid academic enterprises in their own right; however, no study has so far addressed "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" in the light of the Levinasian ethics and its delineation of the encounter between the ethical subject and the Other. Below is provided an overview of what the French philosopher has defined as ethics.

### **Saying the Unsaid, Unsayings the Said: Levinasian Ethical Language and the Other**

Levinas attempts to describe the Other in term of the experience of "metaphysics." In his terminology, metaphysics is referred to as that which is "turned toward the 'elsewhere' and the 'otherwise' and the 'other'" (Levinas, 1969, p. 33). He considers metaphysics as a movement which is aimed at what is beyond perception and understanding; it is that moment of philosophical astonishment whence what is unknown comes forth as a disturbance of what is within the scope of knowledge, a trembling that shakes the very consistency of the subject, a "movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us ... toward an alien outside-of-oneself" (Levinas, 1969, p. 33); it is a desire for what has been lost, a nostalgia, a "longing for return," an obsession for what goes beyond my understanding as a subject, a yearning for an invisible saying for which there is no equivalent (Levinas, 1969, p. 34).

Accordingly, subjectivity is imperiled by the emergence of the Other to whom one can converse only in "ethical language." In every description Levinas gives of it, ethical language is a non-verbal relation with the Other based on a radical asymmetry that occurs in the encounter with the "face" of the other. It is an encounter with that whose manifestation as a face is significantly the "first discourse" since "to speak is before all this way of coming from behind one's appearance, behind one's form - an opening in all the openness" (Levinas, 1986, 352). In this moment of ethical astonishment, "not only do I face the face in language, the face also faces in language: 'the face speaks'" (Robbins, 1999, p. 57).

This exteriority manifests itself as a saying that endures not as an answer to a question, but rather, as a question that distorts the establishment of any answering. The content of this ethical interruption for Levinas is in this "risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability" (Levinas, 1981, p. 48). As a result, ethical language would be the expression of the face in the form of an absence, a trace whose movement reveals itself to the subject and simultaneously withdraws from being disclosed. It should be noted that in order for the ethical language to emerge, there

must be a disruptive saying within the sequence of the said whose every motion “resound[s] as a silence without becoming a theme itself” (Levinas, 1981, p. 38).

According to Levinas of “Language and Proximity,” the “incommunicable” and “irresistible” presence of the Other, which is revealed to the subject through sporadic visions, is a non-verbal saying prior to anything verbally said; it is an act of interruption, which once said or seen, resists signification; it is a contentless relation “in which every transmission of messages ... is already established, [it is] the original language, a language without words or propositions, pure communication” (1987a, p. 119); a language that touches the Other in anonymity since the gist of the Other is “its very ambiguity, its enigma ... its transcendence outside of intentionality” (p. 125).

On that account, to experience the revelation of the Other’s face as an interruptive silence is the same as the experience of a mode of saying that Levinas calls *il y a*, the sheer *there is*, wherein there is existence, but no definite identity. As Levinas writes in *Time and the Other*, “Let us imagine all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness. What remains after this imaginary destruction of everything is not something, but the fact that there is [il y a]” (1987c, p. 46). This mode of “anonymous existence” is an interruptive movement which leads not only to the dissolution of all things, but also, of “the very distinction between subject and object” (Robbins, 1999, p. 92).

Significantly, in the encounter with the Other, the irresponsible answer to the call of the Other’s face would be to limit and frame it in ordinary language; it would be to disclose the true essence of things with verbal and pictorial re-presentations; it would be to have “gratitude” in the recognition of the Other for gratitude requires a mutual communication that results in a total negation and categorization of the Other being in a meaningful structure. Nonetheless, the vision of the Other, acknowledged in its ultimate singularity and otherness, “requires an ingratitude of the other” since gratitude would in fact be “the return of the movement to its origin” (Robbins, 1999, p. 7), a state that Levinas associates with the biblical figure Abraham. Unlike the Odyssean journey in which “all the seemingly unforeseeable adventures are but an accident of the return home” (Robbins 1999, 4), Abraham, in an irreversible movement, leaves “his fatherland forever for a land yet unknown” (Robbins, 1999, p. 21), a one-way movement that goes unto the Other without any return to the point of departure.

In approaching the subject, as Levinas emphasizes in “Phenomenon and Enigma,” the face enters as a new order that dismantles the order of Being, and in so doing, the meeting of the two orders “ends in conciliation, in the constitution of a new order which ... shines through this conflict” (1987b, p. 64). This concrete form of alterity reenters the previous order as a disturbance whose non-definability threatens the establishment of meaning since in its revelation, the face becomes an order that causes disorder itself, a meaning that goes beyond meaning, a mode of advancing that simultaneously retreats; it is a way of manifesting in which the manifested exceeds manifestation, for the face is not a “simple ambiguity in which

two significations have equal chances and the same light,” but an enigma whose exorbitant meaning “is already effaced in its apparition” (1987b, p. 66).

It is worth mentioning that in the subject’s encounter with the Other, the face issues a primordial message of absolute responsibility which is rooted pre-historically in the expression of the face and takes the form of an ambiguity that dismantles the very foundation of the meaning whose visual or lingual expression is “not as something given or intended, but as a certain disquietude, as a *dérangement* which puts us out of our common tracks” (Waldenfels, 2002, p. 63; italics in original). In his description of such an ethical expression that “deranges” the ordinary route of being, Levinas emphasizes the non-intentional quality of the face, which in the form of an enigmatic vision, delivers a message that does not return to its original point of departure to signify; rather, it departs toward an unknown horizon wherein the sound of what is said resounds as a silence that not only signifies nothing and carries no content inside itself, but also, in its every movement, breaks the unity which is assumed for the transmitted message.

In addition, ethical language is materialized in a face-to-face encounter with the Other being whose primary visual manifestation is an ethical expression that compels me to respond as that “whose first word is obligation” (Wyschogrod, 2002, p. 196) and my response is a “signification opened up by utterance [which] is given to the other as *language*” (Wyschogrod, 2002, p. 194; italics added). For this reason, it is “the face to face relation, the essential moment of ethics” that first finds language, and as a result, the relation of the subject with the Other is primarily activated as an ethical conversation (Eaglestone, 1997, p. 121).

Thus, Levinas uses the correlation between saying and the said in order to emphasize the primacy of this “Other” ethical language whose signification is inextricable from its manifestation, a mode of utterance that serves as an “expression of answerability prior to the expression of questions and answers” (Llewelyn, 2002, p. 127). Before being said by the speaking face of the Other, saying, as an intrusion on the system, detracts order from the said as a meaningful entity and leaves its imprint on the said through being a Desire that language never satisfies, for “the desirable does not fill up my desire but hollows it out, nourishing me as it were with new hungers” (Levinas, 1986, p. 351).

The said, as “a ‘passive synthesis’ of what ‘passes’” (Levinas, 1981, p. 114), shows itself as a statement that reduces the reality of things to a single term and fixates saying by giving its passing transcendence a name so as to immobilize it with a meaning since saying is an in-process movement whose motion is frozen the moment it is manifested as a meaningful statement. As “the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification” (Levinas, 1981, p. 5), saying is the primordial state of meaningfulness that always already has a signification of itself before the ascription of any meaning to it. It is that reversal movement that conveys a message not of understanding but of sensibility and responsibility. This calling in silence reminds the subject of the very existence of another being who transmits to the subject a de-thematized message that is just meant to be heard rather than understood.

On that account, saying would be an absolute defiance against the objectification of thought, for to objectify thought would be to embellish it with forms and signs that are meant to take on meaning. In brief, saying “uncovers the one that speaks, not as an object disclosed by theory,” but rather, as the one that “discloses oneself by neglecting one's defenses, exposing oneself to outrage, to insults and wounding” (Levinas, 1981, p. 49). It is that groundless speech whose content touches the Other, leaving it with the remnants of its traces in the form of the said; it is a kind of presence of an absence whose signification belongs to an “irrecuperable, unrepresentable” past, a proximity irreducible to consciousness (Levinas, 1981, p. 46). The next section of the present study will analyze Aiken’s “Silent Snow, Secret Snow” in the light of Levinasian philosophy in an attempt to shed light on the ethical relationship between the subject and the Other in the short story.

### **Silent Language, Secret Other: Provocation of Alterity in Aiken’s “Silent Snow, Secret Snow”**

Conrad Aiken (1889-1973) was a prolific American writer mostly famous for his collections of psychological poetry, one of which won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1930. However, Aiken is now frequently remembered for his highly anthologized short story “Silent Snow, Secret Snow,” first published in 1932. It is the story of a twelve-year-old schoolboy named Paul Hasleman who is living with his parents in an unspecified town. When Paul wakes up one morning, he notes that there is something markedly different about the footsteps of the postman who comes to deliver packages to the neighborhood on a daily basis. Paul feels that the postman’s footsteps are muffled for a few moments that morning and are then resumed; thus, he infers that it is snowing outside and reasons that the postman’s footsteps cannot be heard because he puts down his boots on the snow. Nonetheless, when he gets up and looks out of the window, to his dismay and disappointment, he sees nothing but bare, empty, and dry streets. That is when he realizes it is only he who can “hear” the silent, secret snow. The situation gets exacerbated as the intervals in which his footsteps cannot be heard are extended every single day, and this means he can hear the silent snow even more strongly.

The story is composed of four episodes. In the first part, Paul’s absentminded participation in the geography class is narrated parallel to his experience of the uncanny snowfall and also to his mounting apprehension that his parents have noticed his constant daydreaming and are now getting worried about his physical and mental health. The second section is devoted to Paul’s return from school to home, delineating how he is getting more and more detached from the external world, which is now ugly, dirty, and detestable to the protagonist’s eyes. The third episode pictures his parents’ attempt to diagnose the cause of his disquieting pensiveness by calling in Doctor Howells, a family friend. Tired of the seemingly interminable questions of the doctor and his parents and simultaneously hearing the snow’s inscrutable whispers to him, Paul ultimately succumbs to pressures and tells them he is obsessed with the snow. Finding how this confession has appalled the three adults and tempted by the seductive voice of the snow, he suddenly decides to escape to his room upstairs in a bid to find the soothing company of the snow. The

story reaches its climax in part four, a very short episode less than two pages. When Paul's mother enters his room to see if he is alright, he coarsely orders her out. The story ambiguously ends with the snow dominating all over the room.

From the opening lines of the story, one is recurrently exposed to the disruptive presence of a thing beyond conception whose encouragement to "silence," "cold," and "sleep" disengages the subjectivity of the protagonist. It is of great importance to note that Paul's ethical quest to encounter the cryptic Other ends up in a total annihilation of the self for the sake of retaining the alterity and novelty of the Other. It is a one-way movement that goes unto the Other without any return to the point of departure. The inability to escape the call of the Other is a responsive passivity on the part of the protagonist, a pure form of contact, before any mode of mutual communication actually occurs. As noted in the previous section, the Levinasian ethical encounter comes from a dimension of height, from a "beyond," where the Other is located at a distance that guarantees its unreachable exteriority. The unavailability of the Levinasian Other is well captured in Aiken's first-page representation of the unknowable "thing," that is, the snow, which is always shrouded in an atmosphere of mystery: "The thing was above all a secret, something to be preciously concealed from Mother and Father; and to that very fact it owed an enormous part of its deliciousness" (1934, p. 570).

Accordingly, Paul can be said to embody the Levinasian ethical subject whose confrontation with the Other is marked by an absolute passivity and inescapable responsibility which pave the way for the merging of the subject with the Other, since in Levinasian ethics, "to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility" (Hutchens, 2004, p. 19). Paul's responsible interaction with the *thing* can be traced from the very first page of "Silent Snow, Secret Snow." The story tellingly starts with the manner Paul faces the Other; he does not know why "it" is happening to him, "nor would it even have occurred to him to ask" (p. 570). The impact of such passive responsibility on the subject is so grave that Paul, from the very beginning, prioritizes the ethereal world to the realm of the mundane. Notably, as the first episode of the story describes Paul's uncanny encounter with the snow, the events of the real world (that is, what goes on in the geography class) are recounted in parentheses (Ruthrof, 1973, p. 406), a narratorial technique which shows the ethical subject is entirely preoccupied with the Other world and therefore, the surrounding environment becomes less significant to him.

As can be seen in the text, instead of relating the content of this strange "thing" to his consciousness, Paul adopts a non-totalizing approach which emphasizes his inability to disclose the mystery of the Other since any attempt to do so would be to betray the incomprehensibility of the Other, a risk he is not willing to take. Once exposed to the face of the Other, not only does Paul never claim to unravel the signification of the Other through putting it into something "said" and meaningful, he even adds to the ambiguity of the Other by maintaining and protecting the secrecy and strangeness of this ominous being whose momentary revelation in the form of a face issues a call for responsibility in answering and addressing it, since "the self that responds to the command *that it must do something* does so without hearing the theme of *what* it must do" (Hutchens, 2004, p. 48; italics

original). This ethical relationship is manifest in the following excerpt from the story where Paul elaborates on the quality of his secret encounter with the snow:

As he listened to these things, he was already, with a pleasant sense of half-effort, putting his secret between himself and the words. Was it really an effort at all? For effort implied something voluntary, and perhaps even something one did not especially want; whereas this was distinctly pleasant, and came almost of its own accord. (p. 571)

Under such *ethical* circumstances, Paul describes his experience of the Other as an interruption in the straightforward direction of the said: "It was irresistible. It was miraculous. Its beauty was simply beyond anything - beyond speech as beyond thought - utterly incommunicable" (p. 575). As Robbins maintains, "Unlike other signs, facial expressions signify only themselves. They do not refer to something else, to states of mind or feeling. Their autosemification is presemiotic and has no cognitive content" (Robbins, 1999, p. 58). This means that for Paul, the experience of the sound of the postman's approaching steps and also his blurred vision of the snow would be to encounter the state of *il y a* (there is). At this point, Paul's subjectivity is interrupted in the presence of an absence whose expression as a face (or a vision) reminds him of a transcendence laid outside, which in anonymity invites the subject to *listen* rather than to *speak* since to listen would be to touch things in the non-existence of light, a situation in which all things are heard in their absence rather than seen in their presence. Such an experience of disturbance is imposed on Paul when that strange "thing" addresses him:

'Listen to us!' it said. 'Listen! We have come to tell you the story we told you about. You remember? Lie down. Shut your eyes, now - you will no longer see much - in this white darkness who could see, or want to see? We will take the place of everything ... Listen'. (p. 589)

In similar fashion, Aiken uses the tension between "seeing" and "listening" to prioritize listening over other perceptions as it symbolically allows the resigned subject to fulfill the Levinasian desire to be fully assimilated into the Other. Seeing here stands for the conventional ways of grasping the world in favor of the subject while listening, from a Levinasian perspective, is the sign of total subservience toward the Other and a pre-context to go beyond logical understanding. The conflict of the story is exposed when Paul starts to *listen* to the silent snow for the first time, but fails to *see* the snow in the real world. When Paul's daydreaming deepens and he gradually appears lost in familial conversations, his parents impute his absentmindedness to a possible eyestrain, in order to cure which, they buy a new lamp to add more light to Paul's study: "A new lamp provided for his evening work - perhaps it was eyestrain which accounted for this new and so peculiar vagueness of his" (p. 575). It needs to be mentioned here that as the story moves on, the protagonist gradually loses his "vision" of the world and, after a while, is unable to differentiate between what he sees outside and his not-visible-to-public interactions with the sound of silent, secret snow.

Notably, the snow, as the emblem of ethical saying, is so prominent in Paul's psyche that it turns into an integral part of his worldview. That is to say, he accepts

the ubiquity of the snow without questioning its origin, essence, and ultimate purpose, to such an extent that the silent snow, which is only visible and audible to the ethical subject, becomes merged with the actual world. For instance, when Miss Buell (Paul's geography teacher) asks him a question, he "stared through the snow towards the blackboard" (p. 577); or in the second episode, Paul, on his way homeward, lifts his hand "to shade his eyes against snow-sun" (p. 581) and looks through "the snow-laden sunlight" (p. 580). This symbiosis of the impossibles (i.e., the ethereal and the physical) which can be detected in numerous other examples throughout the text show that Paul never tries to impose his subjectivity on the Other; instead, he is passively inscribed by it.

The character of the postman is also of great importance in the Levinasian analysis of Aiken's short story. Importantly and contrary to our expectations, he is never shown to deliver any specific material objects to the Haslemans and other neighbors. Also, he is never seen by any of the characters, even the protagonist. He is an invisible messenger whose materiality is conveyed to Paul and also to the readers through the sound of his heavy boots and his knock on the Haslemans' door. The postman is the carrier of a silent, secret message regarding the partial absence of the Other. This message is never fully materialized and only "traces" of it are presented to the protagonist in the form of uncanny, incommunicable sounds.

The point of note here is that although Paul ethically disregards his subjectivity in favor of the postman, as the so-called messenger, and the snow, as his enigmatic message, there are other characters in the story such as Miss Buell, his parents, and the doctor, whose relationships with the Other(s) are of a totally different kind. Common among all these adult figures are a firm insistence on tagging other phenomena, a desire to label things according to the already existent frameworks, and an unflinching tendency to find clear-cut, definite explanations for opaque ambiguities. For instance, when a schoolgirl named Dreidre poetically and unconventionally describes the equator as "a line that ran round the middle" (p. 570), Miss Buell teases her by saying, "Ah! I see. The earth is wearing a belt, or a sash. Or someone drew a line round it!" (p. 571), making her the object of her classmates' ridicule. In fact, the extract shows definitions are so hard-and-fast and nonnegotiable in the realm of the mundane that even the slightest transgression in naming and explaining (O)ther phenomena is not tolerated.

The same fixed and fixating attitude can be traced in the manner Paul's parents and Doctor Howells attempt to determine the cause of his so-called abnormal behavior. According to Levinas, the inclination to "understand" the Other on the part of the subject would finally eventuate in a conscious struggle to manipulate and mold the Other, i.e., to divest the Other of its Otherness and transfigure it into another subject in the realm of the mundane. This restricted and restrictive frame of mind is illustrated in the therapy session for which Aiken deliberately chooses the *mise en scène* of a criminal interrogation, that is, the investigators clinically looking at the suspect under a dim light: "After supper, the inquisition began. He stood before the doctor, under the lamp" (p. 583). Significantly, the extract also alludes to inquisition, a scheme launched by the Catholic Church to identify and punish the heretics. The gruesome practice reached

its apex in the notorious Spanish Inquisition, initiated in 1478 by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain (Bergemann, 2019, 35). The plan allowed the *unethical* employment of systematic torture to crack down on dissenters and all who seemed to be “withholding evidence” (Hassner, 2020, p. 1), i.e., all the Others.

Very much like Miss Buell, the doctor, the inquisitor, also utters his unyielding demand to procure answers from the protagonist: “Now Paul - I would like very much to ask you a question or two. You will answer them, won't you -” (p. 584), a statement which includes an indirect threat in the end. It is well to mention here that the words “question(s)” and “answer(s)” have been repeated 5 and 8 times, respectively, in different contexts throughout the story, signifying the importance of conventional, meaning-oriented communications in the world of unethical inquisitions. However, things are radically different in the Levinasian world of ethical encounters. It is for this reason that when Paul, as an ethical subject, is asked to ponder over every question (“think it over and be quite sure”), the request strikes him as absurd since to him, certainty is no more than an illusion:

He felt himself smiling again, at the notion of being quite sure. What a joke! As if he weren't so sure that reassurance was no longer necessary, and all this cross-examination a ridiculous farce, a grotesque parody! What could they know about it? These gross intelligences, these humdrum minds so bound to the usual, the ordinary? Impossible to tell them about it! (p. 586)

Ethically speaking, once Paul is subjected to the expression of the Other's face (i.e., the postman and the snow), which manifests itself as a disturbing saying, his consciousness fades away at the expense of a total surrender to the call of the Other. For Paul, to respond to that call is to go beyond the mathematical objectification of the Other since in the ethical encounter with the Other, there is no logical conformity but only compassion and respect to its alterity. This sublime status of the Other fills Paul with a sense of awe, wonder, and veneration:

What was this? this cruel disturbance? this act of anger and hate? It was as if he had to reach up a hand toward another world for any understanding of it, - an effort of which he was only barely capable. (p. 589)

Consequently, where language for Paul fails to present the Other as a theme in the form of something said, the expression of the Other's face speaks as a past that no memory can resurrect due to its being situated beyond consciousness and understanding. Similar to the ethical acts of generosity and sacrifice where the subject loses itself for the sake of the Other, to answer the demand of the Other's face is a one-way movement in which one leaves in order not to ever return. As Levinas notes, “the response to the enigma's summons is the generosity of sacrifice outside the known and the unknown, without calculation, for going on to infinity” (1987b, pp. 72-73). This means Paul's movement toward infinity becomes an ethical appreciation of saying that, from a Levinasian perspective, can be perceived “only through those ruptures - or traces of those ruptures - that it has left to the order of the Said” (Korhonen, 2017, p. 368).

As mentioned above, Paul, as a Levinasian ethical subject, gradually becomes one with the Other (i.e., the mysterious sound of the silent snow). This unification is about to become consummated in the third episode when Paul is being examined by the doctor. The voice of the Other is now finding unprecedented control over the subject who seems to be totally at its beck and call. This eerie nonexistent existence surreptitiously whispers to Paul, calling for the expulsion of the adults and a private rendezvous between the two: “Tell them to go away. Banish them. Refuse to speak. Leave them, go upstairs to your room, turn out the light and get into bed -I will go with you, I will be waiting for you” (p. 585).

Ultimately, when its demands are met and Paul flees to his room, the process of the unification of the subject and the Other is completed in episode four; Paul and the snow are united and this is the rest of the world (that is, the realm of the mundane and its inhabitants such as Mother, Father, Miss Buell, and Doctor Howells) which now transforms into an uncompromising rival. When Paul and the snow are alone in the room, “a gash of horrible *light*” disrupts their tryst and subsequently, the snow, feeling betrayed, “drew back” because “something *alien* had come into the room” (589; italics added). That is to say, the protagonist and the Other have become one at the end of the story and this is the intruding mother who is now granted alienation. Paul’s voice is presently no different from that of the snow as he has passively merged with the Other; his words are no more his, but are uttered at the command of the Other: “the exorcising words ... tore themselves from his other life suddenly – ‘Mother! Mother! Go away! I hate you!’ And with that effort, everything was solved, everything became all right” (p. 590). As the excerpt demonstrates, the ethical encounter in “Silent Snow, Secret Snow” culminates in the utopian moment of the fusion of the subject and the Other when “everything” improves to a new ethical status.

### Conclusion

The relationship between self and the Other has been one of the central concerns in postist discourses. This issue found a new resonance in the works of Levinas who founded his concept of ethics upon an idiosyncratic reading of the subject / Other encounter. This paper has analyzed Aiken’s renowned short story “Silent Snow, Secret Snow” in the light of Levinasian ethics. The study has employed Levinas’s account of the Other, as well as its expression in the form of a face, to examine the protagonist’s appreciation of an Other being that exists outside the ordinary track of comprehension. In other words, the way Paul adopts an ethical quest for the Other echoes the actions and *weltanschauung* of a Levinasian subject whose movement toward infinity requires a passive attentiveness to the demands of the Other. The result for such an ethical manner would be an unconditional annihilation of subjectivity for the sake of the Other.

Throughout the story, Paul perpetually hears the murmurs of an ominous absence whose traces are revealed to him in the forms of the silent sound of snow and the secret approaching footsteps of the postman. This manner of manifestation is a mode of ethical saying that recedes from signifying the moment it is said. That is the reason the vision of the snow and the sound of the postman are represented as an

absent presence only visible and audible to Paul, traces which serve as interruptions disturbing his consciousness. The Other invites him to a dark silence that reverberates in anonymity and resists to be touched since in order for the protagonist to enter this secret world, he must not speak or see but *listen*, as that whose first word is responsible responsivity before any mode of meaningful communication occurs.

### References

- Aiken, C. (1932). Silent snow, secret snow. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 8(4), 570-590. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26433593>.
- Bergemann, P. (2019). *Judge thy neighbor: Denunciations in the Spanish Inquisition, Romanov Russia, and Nazi Germany*. Columbia University Press.
- Eaglestone, R. (1997). *Ethical criticism: Reading after Levinas*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Graham, B. (1968). 'Silent snow, secret snow': The short story as poem. *The English Journal*, 57(5), 693-695. <https://doi.org/10.2307/812566>.
- Hassner, R. E. (2020). The cost of torture: Evidence from the Spanish Inquisition. *Security Studies*, 29(3), 1-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1761441>.
- Hutchens, B. (2004). *Levinas: A guide for the perplexed*. Continuum.
- Korhonen, K. (2017). Levinas and literary interpretation: Facing Baudelaire's "eye of the poor." In J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (pp. 366-381). Wiley Blackwell.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. (Alphonso Lingis, Trans.) Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1981). *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*. (Alphonso Lingis, Trans.). Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Levinas, E. (1986). The trace of the Other. In M. C. Taylor (Ed.), *Deconstruction in context* (pp. 345-359). University of Chicago Press.
- Levinas, E. (1987a). Language and proximity. (Alphonso Lingis, Trans.) *Collected philosophical papers* (pp. 109-126). Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Levinas, E. (1987b). Phenomenon and enigma. (Alphonso Lingis, Trans.) *Collected philosophical papers* (pp. 61-73). Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Levinas, E. (1987c). *Time and the Other*. (R. A. Cohen, Trans.). Duquesne University Press.
- Llewelyn, J. (2002). Levinas and language. In S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Levinas* (pp. 119-138). Cambridge University Press.
- Perkins, G. (1962). Aiken's 'Silent snow, secret snow'. *The Explicator*, 21(3), 47-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.1962.11482322>.

- Robbins, J. (1999). *Altered reading: Levinas and literature*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ruthrof, H. (1973). A phenomeno-sociological approach to fiction. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 33(3), 399-407. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2106952>
- Slap, L. A., & Slap, L. R. (1980). Conrad Aiken's 'Silent snow, secret snow': Defenses against the primal scene. *American Imago*, 37(1), 1-11. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26303809>.
- Stevenson, S. (2004). The anorthoscopic short story. *Oxford Literary Review*, 26, 63-78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44030807>.
- Swan, J. G. (1989). At the edge of sound and silence: Conrad Aiken's 'Senlin: A biography' and 'Silent snow, secret snow.' *The Southern Literary Journal*, 22(1), 41-49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20077971>.
- Tressin, D. (1966). Toward understanding. *The English Journal*, 55(9), 1170-1174. <https://doi.org/10.2307/812307>.
- Waldenfels, B. (2002). Levinas and the face of the Other. In S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Levinas* (pp. 63-81). Cambridge University Press.
- Werlock, A. H. P. (2010). *The facts on file companion to the American short story*. Facts On File.
- Wyschogrod, Edith. (2002). Language and alterity in the thought of Levinas. In S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Levinas* (pp. 188-205). Cambridge University Press.

### Authors' Biographies

---



**Mohammadreza Touzideh** received his B.A. and M.A. in English Language and Literature from the University of Mazandaran and Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, respectively. His main areas of interest are Ethical Criticism, Literary Studies, and Postmodernism.



**Farshid Nowrouzi Roshnavand** is an Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Mazandaran, Iran. He received his B.A. from Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Tehran. His research interests include Disability Studies, African American Studies, and Écriture Feminine.

---