

REVOLUTIONARY DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES: MESSAGES IN THE NIGHT?

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I. Introduction

I would posit that the American Revolution altered both individual and communal "dream images" of the contemporary reality, of the future, and perhaps of the past as well. I would like to raise the possibility that there may as well be a relationship between «real» dreams and visions and the changing social reality of the revolutionary period¹. The manifest content of dreams has been shown to vary with sex, age, and culture, and individual's dreams have been utilized to understand values, motivations and fears, as well as images of self and society². Investigation of dreams themselves, as well as the dreamers' understandings of them and the society's changing conception of the meaning and function of dreams can perhaps give us new insights into the changing social reality of the Revolutionary period³.

In this paper, which is a very preliminary presentation of work in progress, I propose to take a very brief look at eighteenth century ideas of the meaning of dreams, and then to consider the dreams of two individuals who were affected by the Revolutionary turmoil. First, Landon Carter (1710-1778), a leading member of the Virginia elite, active in colonial politics (in the Burgesses 1752 to 1768), Carter was an early defender of American liberties. In the fall of 1764 Carter was one of the first to articulate the threat to be found in the Stamp Act, and he continued to be a harsh

¹ On the perceived difference between visions and dreams, see Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England*, London, 1977, 84.

² The literature is extensive. Among the more important works are Calvin S. Hall and Robert L. Van de Castle, *The Content Analysis of Dreams*, New York, 1966; G.E. Von Grunbaum and Roger Caillois, *The Dream and Human Societies*, Berkeley, 1966; Carol Winget and Milton Kramer, *Dimensions of Dreams*, Gainsville, 1979; Carl W. O'Neill, *Dreams Culture and the Individual*, San Francisco, 1976; Z. Giora, Y. Esformes and A. Barak, «The Dream in Cross-Cultural Research», *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 13 (1972), 105-115; Jacques Le Goff, «Dreams in the Culture and Collective Psychology of the Medieval West», in *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, Chicago, 1980, 201-204; Jackson S. Lincoln, *The Dream in Primitive Cultures*, Baltimore, 1935; George Devereux, *Reality and Dream*, Garden City, 1969; Robert A. LeVine, *Dreams and Deeds*, Chicago, 1966.

³ E. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley, 1951; Barbara Ann Meyer, «Dreams and their Relationship to the Social World», Ph.D., University of Massachusetts, 1981; Harry B. Weiss, «Oneirocritica Americana: the Story of American Dream Books», *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, (June-July, 1944), reprinted 1944.

critic of virtually all the English « encroachments » on American liberty⁴. During the Revolutionary turmoil he served as Chairman of the Richmond County Committee (Sept (?) 1774 to June (?) 1775) and he then viewed the potential « enslavement » of white Americans as the key issue, maintaining that Great Britain had a « cruel and determined plan of administration to enslave these colonies »⁵. He was, at the time, owner of over 400 black slaves⁶.

The second « dreamer » I want to consider is George White. White, born a slave in Virginia in 1764, worked his way North following his manumission in Maryland in 1789 (or 1790), and became a Methodist exhorter in 1805 and a licensed Methodist preacher in 1807. He later moved out of the mixed (or White) Methodist Church, and helped found the African Methodist Episcopal Church in New York. Joining Bishop Richard Allen's connection, he was sent to the White Plains or Huntington Circuit in 1822⁷.

The Revolution affected White's life in different ways than it had Carter's: White no doubt owed his physical freedom, in some good part, to the Revolutionary legitimation of manumission (although the decline of the tobacco economy in Maryland probably played a significant role as well)⁸. And the Revolutionary ferment may well have played a role in his own self-assertion which gained him recognition, both in the « white » (or mixed) Methodist Church, and in black circles.

Finally, I'd like to try to assess Carter's and White's imagined life-plans and the way in which their understanding of their dreams meshed with those, as well as with the changes in society. Consideration of Carter's and White's dreams may help explicate their unconscious response to events as well as their development.

II. Eighteenth Century "Understandings"

Eighteenth-century America inherited very mixed views about the meaning and significance of dreams. Ancient understandings were still known, with

⁴ Jack P. Greene, « Introduction », *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, Charlottesville, 1965, 7, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7. See N.F. Okoye, « Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolution », *William and Mary Quarterly*, 37 (1980), 3-28.

⁶ *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie, 19 May 1875.

⁷ George White, *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels and Gospel Labours of George White, An African; Written by Himself and Revised by a Friend*, New York, 1810; Daniel Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. C.S. Smith, Nashville, 1891; Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as it Developed Among Blacks in America*, Garden City, N.Y., 1976; James Shaw, *The Negro in the History of Methodism*, Nashville, 1954; Carol V.R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths; Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840*, New York, 1973; Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845*, Princeton, 1965; William Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*, Urbana, 1986.

⁸ Richard S. Dunn, « Black Society in the Chesapeake, 1776-1810 » in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, Charlottesville, 1983, 49-82.

roots in the Biblical tradition as well as that of Artemidorus, the second century A.D. Roman dream analyst, whose *Interpretation of Dreams* was known in the original down through the fifteenth century, and was translated into English in the sixteenth (1518), and widely disseminated⁹.

In the late Middle Ages there had been a very mixed Catholic view of dreams: they were seen as a potentially rich source of revelation (and incubation of dreams was widely practiced at some monasteries) but they were also widely regarded as a very inviting arena for the devil to work in (and witchcraft was linked to dreams and visions)¹⁰.

In the Reformation period, a new evaluation of dreams was part of changing early modern thought. Luther, for example, suggested that dreams could bring self-knowledge, but he still feared they might sometimes be the work of the devil. While Calvin seemed more sanguine about dreams, and wrote of God (sometimes) speaking through them, he held it « always in an allegorical or obscure way, leaving the person in a quandry »¹¹.

Philip Godwin (1658) and Thomas Tyron (1689) discussed the positive and negative potential of dreams for an elite readership, while Thomas Hill's *The Most Pleasaunte Art of the Interpretation of Dreames* had a more popular audience¹². At the outset of the eighteenth century many popular guide books, as well as priests, ministers, wizards and astrologers were still being consulted by seekers who wanted help with dream divination¹³. However, while many people continued these practices, at the same time the old certainty of dreams' significance as God's or the Devil's word, or as an omen, was being undermined by enlightenment ideas, and many questioned whether irrational dreams had any meaning whatsoever. The idea of dreams bringing self-knowledge was more seriously considered by a small minority.

In 1739 David Hume wrote that « several moralists have recommended it as an excellent method of becoming acquainted with our own hearts, and knowing our progress in virtue, to collect our dreams in a morning, and examine them with the same vigour that we would our most serious and deliberate action ». William Smellie (1740-1795) believed that dream analysis was the best method for self-knowledge. He suggested that dreams are capable of revealing « real motives » and « predominant passions » most often « artful-

⁹ S.R.F. Prince, « The Future of Dreams », 32n.

¹⁰ O'Neill, *Dreams*, 34, 35, notes that incubation was practiced at the Basilica of St. Martin of Tours in France and at the Augustinian Monastery at Donegal Ireland. See also Finucane, *Miracles*, 33-34, 64, 68, 83-85, 111.

¹¹ O'Neill, *Dreams*, 35, 36.

¹² Michael C. DePorte, Introduction to Thomas Tryon, *A Discourse of the Causes, Nature and Cure of Phrensie, Madness or Distraction*, Los Angeles, 1973; Tyron, *A Treatise of Dreams and Visions*, London, 1689; Philip Goodwin, *The Mystery of Dreams Historically Discoursed*, London, 1658; Thomas Hill, *The Moste Pleasaunte Arte of the Interpretation of Dreames...*, London, 1576.

¹³ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, London, 1971, 129, 130.

ly » hidden from our waking selves. He advised the keeping of a candid dream journal or « Nocturnal », to parallel a day-book or diary¹⁴.

A survey of eighteenth century diaries, journals and autobiographies indicates Americans were very concerned with dreams – concerned enough to record them, retell them to friends, and reflect on them, but often confused as to their meaning¹⁵. Many were hesitant to reach conclusions, but they were also very hesitant to disregard dreams.

While Anglicans often had a difficult time assessing the significance of dreams, Quakers, Methodists and Baptists were among those most ready to still see a direct and decipherable message from God in their dreams (as were Shakers and later Mormons). Many among these sectarians made significant life decisions, acting on their interpretations of their dreams and visions. John Churchman, for example, the great eighteenth century Quaker reformer, found that « voices, visions, and dreams were his instructors; once he had heard or seen them he did not deliberate upon them or explain the instructions pragmatically »¹⁶. While Quakers believed their dreams were messages sent by God, they rejected occult divination of the dreams' meanings. They regarded their dreams as « nocturnal allegories of their daytime concerns », and sought Christian understandings¹⁷.

Eighteenth centuries Afro-Americans generally held a pre-modern attitude to dreams. Certainly most Africans took dreams seriously, and believed they held important messages for the dreamer. Africans held a range of ideas about dreams, but these were generally based on the belief that spirits or souls that inhabit a live body can leave that body during sleep (as well as after the body's death). The Ashanti, for example, apparently believed that dreams are caused by visits of other spirits to the sleeping soul, or the travels of the spirit (or one of the spirits) of the sleeping person¹⁸. Elders and ritual dream interpreters played an important role in explicating dreams. An Ashanti elder is quoted as having said that « "If you dream that you have had sexual intercourse with another man's wife and any one hears of it, and tells her husband, then you will be fined the usual adultery fees, for your soul and hers have had sexual intercourse" »¹⁹. Among the Ashanti, « dreams of ancestors are commonly taken to indicate that the dead man requires a sacrifice »²⁰. But the spirits of those dead may also be calling the live person

¹⁴ William Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, II, Edinburgh 1799, 375-377, reprinted in Solomon Diamond, ed. *The Roots of Psychology*, New York, 1974, 508-510.

¹⁵ See Louis Kaplan, ed., *A Bidinggraph of American Autobiographs*, Madison, 1961, listing and indicating the location of over 130 colonial autobiographies.

¹⁶ John Churchman, *An Account of that Faithful Minister of Christ, John Churchman, Late of Nottingham, in Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia, 1882; Jack D. Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-1783*, Philadelphia, 1984, 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁸ R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, London, 1927, 192-196; C.G. Seligman, « Appendix to Chapter 21 », in Rattray, *Religion*, 197-204.

¹⁹ Rattray, *Religion*, 193.

²⁰ Seligman, « Appendix », 198.

to join them, or, on the contrary, warning him or her of danger. Ashanti recognized symbols in dreams; for example, they saw fish as the symbol of conception²¹. However, meanings were often found in « contraries »: « If you dream that you weep, that is joy; if you dream that you laugh, that is sorrow »²².

An Ashanti dream interpretation that has important reverberations for the American experience, both that of witches and more generally for trance and revival experiences, tells that « “If you dream that you have been carried up to the sky, sitting on a sweeping broom, and that you have returned to the ground and are sitting on red clay, that means long life” »²³.

While the evidence for Afro American dream interpretation is generally from a later period, it is so in keeping with the African traditions (mixed with English) that there is little doubt it was shared by the eighteenth century black populace. The belief in the travels of a dream-soul was revealed to both Puckett and Hyatt, by twentieth century American blacks: « Some go as far as to say that a bucket of water should be left in the room so that one’s spirit may drink, or else it may wander so far away in search of water that it can’t get back... », (110) and sweeping after dark was regarded as dangerous as a soul might be swept out²⁴. Dream omens were often taken to mean their contrary as to dream « yourself dead » meant « long life and good luck ». « While a dream of the dead generally means rain, it is a widespread belief that a dream of dying, or a funeral indicates a wedding... ». And in America, too, « ... a dream of fish indicates an increase in the family... »²⁵.

III. *Landon Carter’s Dreams*

In the 1,150 pages of his (1752-1778) diary, Landon Carter mentions only six dreams. He was not a good “recaller”, as he himself was aware, and probably did not try to bring dream images to mind. Nevertheless, these six references provide a possibility of understanding Landon Carter’s attitude to this nocturnal “activity”, and possibly some indication of how his changing political world was affecting him in ways he was not fully conscious of.

Carter saw some dreams simply as night-thoughts, rational thinking during sleep, which could help him in his planning and work. Thus the first dream recorded on Jan. 30, 1771: « I ordered my corn yesterday to be all husked out, either my thoughts or some of my dreams suggest to me that I shall find some spoiled »²⁶. Carter found another one of his dreams funny

²¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

²² Rattray, *Religion*, 196.

²³ *Ibid.*, 195; Seligman, « Appendix », 202.

²⁴ Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, New York, 1968, 85, 109, 113, 169, 188, 394, 496, 534, 557, 570; Harry Hyatt, *Hoodoo, Conjuration, Witchcraft, Root-work: Beliefs Accepted by Many Negroes and White Persons...*, 5 vols., Hannibal, Mo., 1970.

²⁵ Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 499, 501.

²⁶ Carter, *Diary*, 537.

and recounted it to the family, but he may well have been aware that it meant more than he was suggesting: « It is Comical. I dreamed and told my dream that coming from F. Lee's I called in at the weaver's for water and went in and found there a Monster who had broke his leg, etc., And the next day it was reported he (the weaver) was in danger of an inflammation of his lungs ». (This was on the 11th of September 1773)²⁷.

Carter is actually suggesting that his « comical » dream *was* an omen: He saw a monster with a broken leg in the weaver's house and the next day the weaver *was* seriously ill!

Carter never trusted his weavers, most of whom were white indentured servants. Every diary comment about his and his family's weavers was strongly negative: he was constantly suspicious they were selling cloth woven of his yarn and on his time or pretending they were all ill or of finding them drunk. On one occasion Landon Carter had Robert Carter's weaver beaten for theft and when he then spoke disrespectfully to Landon Carter, Carter hit him himself²⁸.

This dream can no doubt be seen to have had many levels of meaning, and I'll return to it later, but it is likely that the dream had a political component as well as personal ones. By 1773 the King had sorely disappointed Carter, who had earlier seen the « conspiracy » against the colonies as controlled by the King's advisors. With the Tea Act, the King was no doubt becoming a monster in Carter's eyes. Would he have liked to have seen him « broken and house-bound »?

On February 21, 1774 Carter wrote: « I dreamed last night that somebody came to me in mourning, acknowledged the folly guilty of, and all was made up. God only knows whether it will be so or not. I can easily forgive the deluded therefore corrected and as there can be nothing to vibrate on my memory I think I can forget »²⁹. Carter himself probably thought he was dreaming of his son, Robert Wormeley Carter, with whom he was at deep odds. He was always accusing him of folly, and ostensibly waiting for him to acknowledge his guilt – to « humble himself » in the proper ritual way – and so be forgiven. That he had deep anger at and resentment of this son, there can be little doubt and one should certainly consider the levels of self-revelation in this dream, but again, it is likely that this dream also reflected Carter's feelings about the developing conflict with Great Britain, revealing a deep hope that indeed the King would mourn his acts, acknowledge his guilt, and « make up ».

On one occasion Carter suggested that a dream was simply a reaction to physical ills: On October 8, 1774, a day in which he vented great rage at his son's « gaming » and « slavery to his passions », his lack of concern for his wife, children and father, and his « dissolute » life, he wrote: « The Colic

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 768.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 845; 141; 212; 383-4; 495; 623-4; 967; 1040; 1088; 1089; 1141.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 796.

only attacked me once in the night which Produced a long dream of entertaining many dead People that waked me; but the Pain abated and I slept well afterwards »³⁰. While Carter paid little attention to this dream it may well suggest that in African fashion he was giving himself the honor of visits from dead spirits, honor that his son was denying him. Carter's political world may have influenced this dream as well: « By the summer of 1774, [Carter]... was advocating resistance to the death if it became necessary. "I am resolved to be free or cease to exist", he wrote to Alexander Purdie in July... »³¹. In his dream, was he not dead already, and joining « many dead People » in their entertainments? He was « at home » with true dead, again an African usage, or holding open-house for them. Would he perhaps rather have been dead than go on the way he was going, breaking what should be a « natural Affection » for Great Britain much as his son had broken his love for his father, and he, perhaps, for his own father? Carter indeed saw the break with Britain as an end to « filial respect »³².

Carter did not record another dream until July 26, 1776. By this time Carter, Virginia, and all America had gone through trials and tribulations. Carter, always for *American rights and liberties*, had strongly opposed the « tendency to independency », and only came to accept it *after* the Virginia declaration in May of 1776, when he found ways to legitimate the reality as having been forced upon American by « British tyranny »³³. The « tyranny » of the English in Virginia was brought home to him in a most direct fashion: On June 26, 1776, in response to Gov. Dunmore's appeal (of November 7, 1775) to slaves to join his « Ethiopian corps », nine of Carter's slaves, led by a black Moses, « ran away » to Dunmore's lines, nine among the 700 odd that reached his encampment³⁴. Most white Virginians saw this invitation of Dunmore's as a « diabolical » act. The Richmond Committee, with Carter at its head, had written that Dunmore's appeal « ... must be produc'd by an intirely debauch'd m[i]nd and bo]dy, now ruined with its own grinding iniquities and disappointments. ... [I]f this said John Earl of Dunmore should ble] permitted to exist any longer on any American earth, that during such an existance he ought to be placed securly chained in some MAD HOUSE... »³⁵. At this juncture Carter became obsessed with these "runaway" slaves. While he wanted them back, he seemed, at the same time, almost anxious to learn that they were dead: no doubt better dead than free!³⁶.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 870.

³¹ Greene, « Introduction », 41.

³² *Ibid.*, 42. For a psychohistorical discussion of sons « rebellions » in the Revolution, see Peter C. Hoffer, *Revolution and Regeneration: Life Cycle and the Historical Vision of the Generation of 1776*, Athens, Georgia, 1983.

³³ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁴ Adele Hast, *Loyalism in Revolutionary Virginia: The Norfolk Area and the Eastern Shore*, Ann Arbor, 1979, 183-188.

³⁵ Robert L. Scribner and Brent Tarter, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, V, Charlottesville, 1979, 60-61.

³⁶ Carter, *Diary*, 1052, 1054, 1055, 1056, 1057, 1068.

On July 25, 1776, Carter dreamt of these blacks, [recording the longest (and most important) dream in his diary]:

A strange dream this day about these runaway people. One of them I dreamt awakened me; and appeared most wretchedly meagre and wan. He told me of their great sorrow, that all of them had been wounded by the minutemen, had hid themselves in a cave they had dug and had lived ever since on what roots they could grabble and he had come to ask if I would endeavor to get them pardoned, should they come in, for they knew they should be hanged for what they had done. I replied a good deal. He acknowledged Moses persuaded them off and Johnny, his wife's father, had helped them to the milk they had, to wit, 4 bottles. He was to have gone with [them] but somehow was not in the way; declared I had not a greater villain belonging to me. I can't conceive how this dream came into my brain sleeping, and I don't remember to have collected so much of a dream as I have done of this these many years. It seems my daughter Judy dreamt much of them too last night. I am just weak enough to fancy we shall soon hear about them³⁷.

Here Landon Carter found himself « weak enough » to believe the dream was predictive. He wanted to believe the « message » he read in this dream, taking it at face value: the slaves were « wretched » and « wan » without his care. The minutemen had wounded them, and only Carter could heal their wounds. They were reduced to uncivilized behaviour without his protection: living in a cave, and eating roots. Only he could save their lives!

Moses, who led these runaways, had been given by Carter to his son, Ralph Wormeley, and was the son's personal servant. His act of "running away" reminded Carter of a disturbing encounter the father and son had had: When Robert had given some table food to Moses, and the father had commented on it, no doubt harshly, Robert Wormeley had called his father « an inhuman creature to his slaves »³⁸. Now Landon Carter saw Moses as « repaying » his son's treatment by stealing guns, ammunition, a boat, silver, clothes, and above all else, himself. Landon Carter ranted about this act, which he saw as a British-stimulated attack on his property and on his own freedom, and predicted it would lead to his own enslavement³⁹. Hearing that three more of his « people » had run away, Carter dreamt about slaves once again, this time that « my last overseer which I turned away, had out of revenge devyld [them] away... I wish I had given a caution about this », he noted, « though it may be only a dream »⁴⁰.

It may only have been a dream, but Landon Carter was convinced that his "own people" were abandoning him, his once-trusted assistants (and children) were seeking revenge, that whites were helping blacks to freedom, and that he could do nothing but « submit »: « Submit » to his tyrant son,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1064.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1052.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1075-76.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, February 13, 1777, 1076.

« submit » to Dunmore's depredations and watch himself be « beggared » and therefore enslaved by Great Britain ⁴¹.

IV. *The Dream of George White*

George White, born in 1764 writing his autobiography in 1810 at age 46, tells us he was « torn » from his mother, a slave in Accomack County, Virginia, at the age of one and a half, and although treated well until age fifteen, he grew up without his parents. He was sold to a decent slaveowner in Somerset County, Maryland, at six, but at age fifteen was purchased by a harsher master « where I continued under all the severities of the most object slavery, till I arrived at the twenty-sixth year of my age » ⁴². While harsh, this master allowed George White to seek out and visit his mother in 1783 (when he was nineteen) and at his death (1789 or 1790) manumitted White, who then chose to begin a journey North « hearing that the Africans were treated with less severity and contempt in the northern than in the southern states... » ⁴³. Born in Virginia, and having lived through the turmoil of the Revolution and become free in its « wake », White regarded himself as an African, and never used the term American, nor did he ever mention the war or the issue of « American liberty ».

Although White writes that he « often » attended the Church of England while a slave, and that he once went to a Methodist Quarterly Meeting in Maryland after being freed, it is not until some five or six years after he was a free-man that he had an ecstatic experience at a watch-night service at the Bowery Church in New York City, and that he joined the Methodist Church. In 1804 White was very deeply influenced by a Methodist camp meeting. Soon after

had the following most affecting, interesting, and frightful dream, or night vision. After the usual religious exercises in my family, I retired to rest at the late hour of about two in morning; and falling to sleep, the place of the future torment of the wicked was presented to my view, with all its dreadful horrors. It was a pit, the depth and extent of which were too vast for my discovery; but perfectly answering the description given of it in holy writ – a lake burning with fire and brimstone; which has enlarged her mouth without measure, and is moved from beneath, to meet the wicked at their coming.

The descent into this place of misery, was by a series of steps, the top of which was near the surface of the earth. In it, I saw vast multitudes of souls, suffering the torments of the damned; out of whose mouths and nostrils issued flames of fire; and from these flames an impenetrable cloud of smoke continually ascended;

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1075.

⁴² White, *A Brief Account*, 5. On slavery in Maryland and Virginia see Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800*, Chapel Hill, 1986 Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century*, New Haven, 1985; Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth Century Virginia*, Princeton, 1988.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

and being attended by a guide, he bade me take particular notice of what was passing, in, and about this hedious gulph; upon which I beheld an host of evil spirits, continually employed in leading human souls to the place of descent into this bottomless pit; at which they were received by other devils, who awaited their coming, and dragged them headlong down the steps, to meet their final doom.

But one, which I particularly observed, and doubted from its smallness and singular appearance, whether it was a human being, had no sooner arrived at this place of misery, than it assumed the features and size of a man, and began, with all the other newcomers, to emit flames of fire, from the mouth and nostrils, like those I had seen there at first.

I next beheld a coach, with horses richly furnished, and full of gay, modish passengers, posting to this place of torment; but, when they approached the margin of the burning lake, struck with terror and dismay, their countenances changed, and awfully bespoke their surprise and fear.

But having myself, while engaged with my conductor, stepped upon the top of the descent, and apparently burnt my feet, which he observing, said to me, « Go, and declare what you have seen ». Upon which I awoke; but so overcome by the effect of what I had seen, that it was a considerable time before I was able to speak ⁴⁴.

The key message of this dream was « “Go, and declare what you have seen” », exactly what White had *not* been doing. He had seen the « treatment » that was « usual for Africans to meet with, in this land of human oppression and barbarity » ⁴⁵, but the hell that he has seen in his dream vision became the “message” he felt he must talk about.

Note that in his vision the pit of hell is a « mouth », and that all the tormented have flames coming from their mouths, and when he wakes, it takes time before he can speak. But speaking is just what he now starts to do, however he begins speaking in « a broken way » and it takes two difficult trials for him to get an exhorter’s license ⁴⁶.

In May of 1806, while exhorting to a group in his own home in New York City,

I fell prostrate upon the floor, like one dead. But while I lay in this condition, my mind was vigorous and active; and an increasing scene of glory opened upon my ravished soul; with a spiritual view of the heavenly hosts surrounding the eternal throne, giving glory to God and the Lamb; with whom, all my ransomed powers seemed to unite, in symphonious strains of divine adoration; feeling nothing but perfect love, peace, joy, and good-will to man, pervading all my soul, in a most happy union with God, my all in all: – every doubt, fear and terror of mind were banished and heaven opened in my bosom ⁴⁷.

White believed he had become « sanctified » by this experience and he then found he had greater power to convert others. That very day « many

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

others... were awakened, converted, and made happy in the pardoning love of Christ. The memory of that glorious day will never be erased from my mind »⁴⁸. White then 42 years old, decided to learn to read, and had his sixteen year old daughter, using only the bible, « learn » him what she had been taught at school⁴⁹. This second great power became his.

Late in 1806, White decided to learn to write as well, with a very clear purpose in mind: So that he could «... minute the travels of my own soul in the way to the Kingdom, and the dealings of God towards me: a blessing I cannot too highly estimate »⁵⁰. Given all these powers, White was not satisfied with exhorting. He wanted to be a preacher of God's Biblical words, « especially among my African brethren... ». To achieve this purpose, White submitted himself to trial after trial in front of a board of White Methodist preachers. Failing to gain their approval time and time again, White returned for further rejection. After the third trial in 1806, White had another vision:

About this time, as I was lying in bed, about twelve o'clock at night, and ruminating upon the glories of heaven; all at once my room, which was before entirely dark, became exceedingly light, and the appearance of three forms, like doves, presented themselves before my wakeful eyes, who, for some minutes looked me full in the face. A peculiar brightness, or light, surrounding each of them. Conceiving them to be angels, I was terrified with fear; but soon disappearing, and leaving the room dark as before, and me to reflect upon what I had seen, my mind was led to embrace the divine promises; and I considered this vision as an omen of good, and that, in due time, I should reap if I fainted not; for his angels are all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to them that shall be heirs of salvation⁵¹.

White, unlike Carter, reflecting on what he had seen, « knew » it to be a good omen, « If I fainted not ». In this vision of three spirits, the Christian concern with the trinity is combined with the African and Afro-American interest in natural omens. Blacks often saw doves as harbingers of good, as of spring or of water, but also of death. Doves were sometimes seen as « ghosts » or spirits, and were recognized as capable of « going to heaven »⁵². Here, they lead White to heavenly assurance, having experienced spirit-travels that were both African and Christian in character.

White subjected himself to a fifth trial on February 14, 1807, and while beforehand he felt certain of success, he failed once again. Greatly agitated at his rejection, he fasted and prayed and « had another remarkable dream »:

In my sleep, a man appeared to me, having under his care a flock of sheep; from which, separating a few, requested I would keep them. But I told him I was no shepherd. However, he went away and left them with me: as he was going, I called

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵² Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 77, 120, 268, 326, 354, 435, 488, 510.

after him to know his name: he replied, that it was enough for me to know that he was a shepherd⁵³.

Again White had no doubts the dream was telling him how to act, and what would happen as if he were strong. At his next trial in August of 1807 there was a marked difference of opinion among the judges, and a heated debate, but at the end White was finally licensed as a Methodist preacher⁵⁴.

White did not read his dreams as I might have: he did not openly talk of the slavery he had seen. But his preaching, was symbolic talk of bondage and of slavery. At his third trial he took as his text John XI 44: « Loose him and Let him Go »⁵⁵. And his choosing to face trial after trial can be seen as a symbolic reenactment of a private « revolutionary war »: He personally entered battle after battle. After his fifth trial, a white preacher asked if he didn't have enough « liberty » already, and he replied that he didn't. « I wished to be at liberty to speak from a text... ». The written word had become his “constitution”. He would have liberty to use his new and great, perhaps almost magical, skills. He could read God's word, and was determined to interpret it, « freely ». This was the ultimate liberty he sought⁵⁶.

George White recognized another more « perfect » liberty. We learn about it in his account of 1808, when he journeyed South yet again, « with a view of visiting my native land, to see my parents, and how it fared with those of my own colour, who I left in a state of slavery a number of years before; in hopes of being beneficial to their souls; for my heart had often felt the keenest anguish for them »⁵⁷. White had been « torn » from his mother at one and a half; he had convinced a harsh slave owner to allow him to seek her out at nineteen. He found her then and had a brief emotional visit, but when he was freed he did not turn South to find her again, but North to a place where he could begin to talk more freely. In 1808 (at age forty-four) White chose to return to Virginia on a journey back into the hell of slavery, down into the pit looking for his mother and father:

But when I reached this place [Somerset County], not finding as I expected, my aged parents, *who had obtained their freedom*, and removed to a great distance from this; nor more than half a dozen persons I had formerly been acquainted with, I spent but a short time among them; during which, I preached but twice, took my leave of them, and set out for home⁵⁸.

Throughout his narrative White has more than hinted at his Afro-American culture: the trinity is represented by doves; a spirit guide leads him

⁵³ White, *A Brief Account*, 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁵⁶ Andrews, *To Tell A Free Story*, 48, 52-56.

⁵⁷ White, *A Brief Account*, 36.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 37, emphasis added. See William Henry Williams, *The Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769-1820*, Wilmington, 1984.

to and from hell, where a « little man » is seen; and trance and shouting lead him on spirit travels. His dreams and his preaching tell us that he was an Afro-Christian but he still called himself an African. I would posit that it is very likely that this « African », who now mentions that Virginia was his « native place » and who is for the first time « at home » in the North, eventually came to recognize his need to talk of hells on earth as well as the other-worldly hell. His later move to black independency suggests his growing identification with his people and their unique need for liberty. Although we don't have other evidence, we know that by 1820, having joined Allen's Church, he was an independent black Methodist, at liberty to speak from the Bible and from the heart.

V. Conclusions

While Landon Carter knew a great deal about himself, unlike White he couldn't seem to use this self-knowledge for self-growth. Writing to George Washington in May of 1776 he made an extraordinary comment:

“I think that in general we are too much tinctured with either the interest or the vanity which most of us acquire from our cradles. I speak as from myself; it has cost me more labour to conquer such habits than ever *Hercules* had. Such an *Augean* stable is the whole world almost!”⁵⁹.

Had Carter had our Freudian terminology, I think he might have called himself “anal”: he clearly recognized both his concerns and their dating from his early-childhood. Carter's diary informs us that he had spent much of his time literally concerned with excrement; with his own motions, or evacuations, and those of his children and slaves. He inspected them, gave drugs to “correct” them, and worried about them. The excreta of his beasts were of great concern as well, and one of his important engineering plans was for a moveable « dung factory ».

For Carter, living his life in an *Augean* stable meant he could never finish shoveling out excrement; and should he rest, he would be covered with slime. Having opened the dangerous “sluice gate” of the revolution, I think he felt that he had broken the King's leg or perhaps « castrated him ». (Remember his father was Robert « King » Carter and it was clearly this King as well who was his rival).

Nothing would be the same anymore: the cave, or his home, could no longer provide security, and his black and white family would no longer stay in their proper places. He himself had finally begun to make moves toward true independence but his dreams suggest that he did not really want revolutionary change, but wanted to replace the old King with a new one, himself. Carter could not really take these dreams seriously, and they didn't help him

⁵⁹ Greene, « Introduction », 12. For a psychohistorical discussion of race and anality, see Earl E. Thorpe, *The Old South: A Psychohistory*, Westport, Conn., 1979; and Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, New York, 1970.

in life. White found strength in his dreams: they gave him goals, and means of persevering. He read them as supportive, even when they were of the fires of hell: he would get out of danger by the word of his mouth. The fire that came from his breath would « tell what he had seen » which would bring him to liberty. White may well have been an « orally fixated personality »; he indeed shared many of the classic attributes. He was « ambitious », « sociable », « accessible to new ideas », « impatient », exhibiting an « intense craving » to get « more » and willing to exert much effort towards this end⁶⁰. Torn from his mother, one would expect him to have had an « intense appetite » for the oral satisfaction she had provided. Hell was an open mouth, words were the road to freedom, and the Shout was the verbal key to heaven⁶¹. White came to see the world as an expanding stage for the drama and joy of redemption, and to see himself as a redeemer whose words were acts. While he felt people could not be depended upon (« our earthly friends may be absent when we want them most ») he found a reliable friend in Jesus: « Our heavenly friend... will never leave nor forsake them who put their trust in him »⁶². He knew him in the travels of his night-time soul, and his day-time task was an act of completion.

Carter, as suggested, fits the classic description of an anal character: one who « obstinate[ly] holds fast to things which he has already got; ... morose irascible...; conservative; hesitating », with « a love of orderliness... parsimony... an over-concern with time, and an obstinacy » which could become « an angry defiance »⁶³. We can chart these traits in Carter as he moved towards the revolution. His obstinacy did become an « angry defiance » but his dreams tell us he wanted to « hold onto his possessions », and that he feared change would bring about losses. He wanted to retain that which he had had, and slaves were the symbol and the reality of his « hold » on the material world. Carter, rich and ostensibly powerful, died feeling he had been a « slave to everyone », while White, a black ex-slave, had become “God’s own freeman” through a revolutionary process in which his dreams played a vital role⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ White, *A Brief Account*.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 57, 58.

⁶³ Karl Abraham, « Contributions to the theory of the Anal Character (1921) », in *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*, New York, 1927, 371, referring to Freud’s 1908 work on anality.

⁶⁴ Greene, « Introduction », 64.