PROLOGUE

In the last years of his life, William Hale White wrote in a notebook: "I have a strange fancy—that there is one word which I was sent into the world to say. At times I can dimly make it out but I cannot speak it. Nevertheless it serves to make all other speech seem beside the mark and futile." In spite of an overwhelming sense of his own limitations, Hale White tried until the end to discover the word that would express the meaning of his life. His writing is thus essentially autobiographical, his fiction a reworking of the struggle of his own spiritual and emotional life. The world of his novels and short stories provided a way to give meaning to human suffering and to create in imagination the solutions that eluded him in actual life. His critical writing similarly is an attempt to answer the question "Wherein can it help me?" In his critical investigations, White sought to uncover the truth about a person, a book, an incident in history, and to hold up to the light whatever might be valuable to us in the struggle of life: "It is by admiration and not by criticism that we live, and the main purpose of criticism should be to point out something to admire." His writing is bleak, sincere, honest, and often astonishingly beautiful.

The areas that White constantly explored issued from memory and were interpreted in hope. He imaginatively reentered his own experience of spiritual exile and uncovered the possibilities for reconciliation and freedom. His exploration is sometimes characterized by ambivalence, even contradiction, for he found no simple answers to the questions that tormented him. Although White never found the ultimately liberating word, he is attractive to us in part because he did not delude himself into thinking that he had. Perhaps only by studying the relationship between his life and his work can the "word,"
and the meaning of his long quest, be understood. I have therefore tried to look at major episodes—both external and internal—in White's life with the purpose of seeing how these events, along with his interpretation of them, engendered the creative process and the concerns of his writing. The series of episodes that seem to have been most significant began with the experience of his youthful "conversion" in Bedford's Bunyan Meeting and his expulsion from New College a few years later. The latter event differs from the typical Victorian crisis of faith in that White discovered that he really had no genuine faith to lose. When, at college, he tried to discover the origins of his ancestral faith by reaching "through to that original necessity" and learning how faith had once been experienced, he found that it was "precisely this reaching after a meaning which constituted heresy." Shortly after his expulsion, White had his first attack of "melancholia," a traumatic event that was to mark him for the rest of his life. His first marriage and several depressing years of clerkship followed. The writing of *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*, his first work of fiction, was the crucial event of his middle age. At fifty, White began to feel a sense of urgency, an increased need both to justify and to escape from a life which he felt had been "consumed in mean, miserable, squalid cares," and commenced his life as a novelist. Retirement, the death of his first wife, and his acquaintance with Dorothy Horace Smith complete the series of important events. With most of them, White seems to have emerged into fuller or more acute consciousness.

White's quest was for the word that would engender genuine freedom of being, a reconciliation with himself and with the world in which he felt so often alien. He found several avenues of potential freedom: through philosophy, especially that of Spinoza, whom he translated and edited; through a conscious and willed relationship with the natural world, especially the heavens; and, most important, through a
reinterpretation of his Calvinist heritage, a reinterpretation that goes to the vital center of Christianity. Penetrating to the “original necessity” of Protestantism, White emphasized the daily, experiential meaning of the Atonement.

White regarded much of his life as a mistake: “The long apprenticeship has ended in little or nothing. What I was fifty years ago I am now; certainly no better, with no greater self-control, with no greater magnanimity. How much I might have gained if I had taken life as an art I cannot say” (MP, 258). He attributed that mistake to the historical accident of his having been born in the nineteenth century. In the character of Mark Rutherford, White wrote his friend Holyoake, he had tried to draw “a victim of the century.”6 Rutherford speaks for his creator when at a particularly difficult moment in his history he laments: “If I had been born a hundred years earlier, I should have transferred this burning longing to the unseen God and become a devotee. But I was a hundred years too late, and I felt that it was mere cheating of myself and a mockery to think about love for the only God whom I knew, the forces which maintained the universe” (A, 110). White felt this “if only” strongly: others of his characters voice the same protest. Zachariah Coleman, Catharine Furze, “Aunt Eleanor” all feel that if only they had been born at an earlier time, their spiritual yearning and emotional energy might have “found expression in the faith of [their] ancestors, large enough for any intellect or any heart at that time.”7 Nineteenth-century people, however, had to “grope their way unassisted” along the path to a genuine religious faith.8

It is true that White’s profound sense of displacement was partly owing to cultural circumstances; but it is also true that his “burning longing” for identity, value, and relationship might have been felt in any age. We are drawn to him because he confronted both the perversity of history and the deep sadness of his own nature with constant courage: “Oh courage,
courage!—it is the foundation of all peace and all virtue. Virtue really is courage. How much of it can we get? how much can we command our constitutional terrors and so march bravely on! That is the problem for us all."