The Ancient Enemy: Melancholia

_The pain of loss was great, but the main curse of my existence has not been pain or loss, but gloom; blind wandering in a world of black fog, haunted by apparitions._

—The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford

**TOWARD THE END** of his life, White exclaimed to his wife Dorothy, "I wish sometimes I could write, as a warning, a real history of my . . . inner life, but it would be too dangerous" (GD, 78). The danger would have been for himself as well as for the public. As we shall see, White's personal history was remarkably full of pain. He suffered from working at a job he disliked; he felt acutely the social evils of his age; he endured constant distress because of his wife's degenerative illness; he himself was often in poor health. Finally and most important, his daily life was disrupted by periods of severe depression that he labels variously "melancholia," "hypochondria," his "personal devil," the "ancient enemy." White's self-conscious and introspective temperament—which I have mentioned before and will return to in a later chapter—was, of course, inextricably linked to this melancholia. We must, however, make a distinction between a nervous and self-involved constitution and the particular
mental state that White describes as “the nameless terror.” The first incidence of this depression occurred shortly after his expulsion from New College, and the condition appears to have become chronic from then on. These periods of melancholia, a history of which White believed would be “too dangerous” for expression, are crucial to our understanding of his religious thought, his imaginative work, and his quest for religious freedom: for the personal faith that White forged from within the darkness profoundly involves his response to melancholy.

The origins of his malady are not entirely clear. Catherine Maclean suggests that White inherited his nervous temperament from his mother, and that the episodes of melancholy are manifestations of this temperament, exacerbated by his distressingly difficult domestic situation.¹ We do not, however, really know much about Mrs. White’s nerves. Indeed, there is little evidence of any kind to suggest that White’s melancholy was hereditary. We know from several accounts that his father was unusually energetic, emotionally stable, and healthy-minded. (White does, though, describe his artistic younger brother, who died in his early twenties, as “passionate, and at times beyond control” [EL,5].) Basil Willey, one of White’s most perceptive readers, argues that his character was “of the manic-depressive type,” and that, while some of his depression was owing to the “petrifaction of Cowfold Dissent,” it would still “be misleading to ascribe his moods of ‘black, moveless gloom’ to his religious doubts.”² White’s sons, however, while they acknowledged their father’s propensity for melancholy, insisted that he suffered from no mental disorder. The eldest son, who became the renowned physician Sir William Hale-White, explained that his father suffered continually from dyspepsia and insomnia, and that these physical ailments precipitated the periods of melancholy.³ Both children alluded to their mother’s illness as the central anguish in their home, although the second son, Jack, also suggested that the “disconsolate moods” that were
frequent with his father stemmed in part from his acute awareness of the problems of the times, in "the decay of religious faith; the ugliness of industrial development; the terrible contrast of poverty and riches." Alluding to Carlyle and Ruskin, he concluded that his father's melancholy, "the cross he carried with him through life," was "a symptom of the age."

All these explanations contain some truth, no doubt. But while White's later melancholia may have been intensified and prolonged by his physical ailments, his domestic situation, and his pained awareness of the evils of his age, I believe we must look to Bunyan Meeting for the principal cause of the malady. The "dark, unbottom'd, infinite Abyss" was first glimpsed during his public testimony. Here his impulse toward introspection and his divided existence began. His own analysis of "the only enemy I really dread" (L, 266) implies that the sources of his anguish were, in the largest sense, religious: "This unaccountable fainting despair, when the pit opens under me and Doubt declares itself—not the common scepticism—is awful. It is a disease with me, but it is a disease due more than ordinary diseases to spiritual causes" (GD, 58). His doubt is not doctrinal scepticism but religious fear. Melancholia has a spiritual or religious source and dimension in that it involves the confrontation with ultimate questions. As we shall see, "Doubt declares itself," and the abyss opens, when White confronts, unprepared, questions about purpose, identity, and personal worth.

What this melancholia was and how it occurred will become more apparent if we look closely at White's initial experience of it. He describes this episode, which happened in the year after his expulsion, in both the Autobiography and The Early Life. Soon after White left New College, he went for some months to Portsmouth, where both his cousin William Chignell and his friend Frederic White lived. Hale had a pleasant vacation, meeting Richard Colenutt, a merchant of Ryde, and his wife, who became his lifelong friends. He read, visited, bathed in the sea,
and enjoyed the glow of martyrdom. He was still riding high on the drama of his expulsion. But this heady excitement could not last long. White had been deprived of his vocation by his actions and those of the New College Council; he had now to think of something else to do. Six months after he had been the central figure in a vigorous national debate, he found himself "adrift, knowing no craft, belonging to no religious body, and without social or political interest" (EL, 79). The temperature of existence suddenly dropped, and life became monotonous and mundane.

At length, he decided to try earning his living as a schoolmaster, and was able to obtain a post at a private establishment in Stoke Newington. In *The Early Life*, White narrates this experience with considerable detachment, giving the facts in an apparently disinterested tone. He concludes the story of his first evening in Stoke Newington with the single comment, "then there fell upon me what was the beginning of a trouble which has lasted all my life" (EL, 80). We can, I believe, attribute this reticence to the nonfictional mode of the narrative, as well as to a consciousness of his audience: the book was written at the request of his children.

The account of the same events in the *Autobiography* is both more extensive and more intensive. Whereas *The Early Life* merely mentions the event in passing, containing within detached fact the chaos that White felt, the *Autobiography* imaginatively realizes and extends the anguish of the sufferer. In Rutherford's history, indeed, the single event is relived and reconceived twice, in a pair of similar episodes.

The first of these, set in a nameless small town in the eastern counties, begins with Rutherford in a fragile and desolate state of mind because his impassioned sermon on the "antecedent necessity" of Christianity, in which he has offered his best, most genuine thoughts, has made no impression whatever on the unfeeling congregation. The palpable quality of his isolation is evoked by a few bleak details: after the sermon, nobody came
near him but the chapel-keeper, "who said it was raining," and "immediately went away to put out the lights and shut up the building" (A, 36). Rutherford has no umbrella and must walk home alone in the November rain. Once home, his supper is found to consist of "bread and cheese with a pint of beer." The fire is unlit. The impact of these details lies in their cumulative effect; together, they communicate a scene of overwhelming solitude. As the next day dawned, Rutherford writes: "all support had vanished, and I seemed to be sinking into a bottomless abyss. I became gradually worse week by week, and my melancholy took a fixed form. I got a notion into my head that my brain was failing, and this was my first acquaintance with that most awful malady hypochondria." The "fixed form," the *idée fixe* that lay upon him for months, "like some poisonous reptile with its fangs driven into my very marrow," was a "dreadful conviction of coming idiocy or insanity." The death which Rutherford prays for to deliver him from this horror does not come. Slowly, gradually, without apparent reason, his melancholy fades; one day, months later on the top of a hill in Devonshire, he feels "a kind of flush in the brain" (A, 37) and the tremulous beginnings of hope.

This incident is, in the *Autobiography*, only a prelude to the major attack a couple of years later in Stoke Newington. The context is similar, although the circumstances that preceded the first episode are intensified. Rutherford has been preaching for more than two years, first in Independent and then in Unitarian chapels; increasingly, "the desire for something like sympathy and love absolutely devoured" him (A, 109); he decides that he can no longer bear to continue his existence among lifeless congregations. He takes the job in Stoke Newington in a mood of weary resignation, feeling "fit for nothing" (A, 111). On a cold and raw January day, he comes up to London. The description of the onset of melancholia that follows is, simply, one of the most convincing and haunting pictures in English prose.
Rutherford arrives in the schoolroom ready to begin his teaching duties. In its factual content, this part of the account is almost identical to the corresponding passage of *The Early Life*. The schoolroom is dark, “save for one candle, and was warmed by a stove”:

The walls were partly covered with maps, and at one end of the room hung a diagram representing a globe, on which an immense amount of wasted ingenuity had been spent to produce the illusion of solidity. The master, I was told, was out, and in this room with one candle I remained till nine o’clock. At that time a servant brought me some bread and cheese on a small tray, with half-a-pint of beer. I asked for water, which was given me, and she then retired. The tray was set down on the master’s raised desk, and sitting there I ate my supper in silence, looking down upon the dimly-lighted forms, and forward into the almost absolute gloom. (A, 112)

Rutherford is then invited to his bedroom, which is in an attic, reached by means of “a ladder standing against a trap-door.” He ascends and pulls the ladder up behind him, thus shutting himself up alone in a room which is “tolerably clean and decent.” He goes to the window and looks out: “There were scattered lights here and there marking roads, but as they crossed one another, and now and then stopped where building had ceased, the effect they produced was that of bewilderment with no clue to it. Further off was the great light of London, like some unnatural dawn, or the illumination from a fire which could not itself be seen” (A, 112–13).

The deliberately controlled survey of the environment produces a feeling of precariousness, of contained hysteria. Here, too, as in the previous evocation of the melancholic event, the precise color and tone of the speaker’s mental state are rendered by the careful focusing of concrete details. The narrating consciousness regards external phenomena with acute concentration. Objects are perceived with an unnatural intensity but
remain isolated, fragments that do not merge to form an integrated impression of place in the mind of the perceiver. Concentrated attention to these separate fragments of the outer environment prevents the observer from confronting the inner landscape he fears; they function almost as a film covering the psychic chaos below the surface; they are what White calls the "painted vapour," the "thin floor" that "separates us from the bottomless abyss." Thus the highlighted details serve as more than an objective correlative of the agonized emotional condition of the narrator; they recreate the disordered, disconnected perceptual process that is a central feature of that condition. "One candle" lights the darkness; a globe, which would usually connote universal perceptible order, produces only the "illusion of solidity" and is the product of "wasted ingenuity." Rutherford is given "bread and cheese" and a "half-a-pint of beer" on a "small" tray. These details suggest not only the unnatural precision of his attention under the pressure of internal distress but, indirectly, the diminution of his being. He is surrounded by "dimly-lighted forms"—in effect, another illusion of solidity—and beyond his vision is "absolute gloom"—that is, impenetrable and meaningless darkness.

Rutherford's ascent to his bedchamber is the literal acting out of an intensifying psychological isolation: he climbs up, and the ladder seals him off. The attic room is the culminating symbol of his estrangement. He is imprisoned, ironically aloft, while his spirit descends gradually into the abyss. The view out the window, which in Victorian literature so frequently heralds heightened or transformed perception, here becomes only the constricting frame of Rutherford's distorted vision of the outer world. His perception of the landscape again reflects the disorder of his mind. The lights are "scattered," that is, random, haphazard; roads, paths that should lead somewhere either cross one another or simply stop. There is "no clue" in the maze of paths; the universe reflects his own lack of focus and direction.
The light of London is possibly also an illusion; it is "unnatural," a kind of "darkness visible." The origin of the light cannot be discovered, just as the source of enlightenment is hidden from him—and may not exist at all.

This moment—embODYING his knowledge of exile and the image that came to symbolize that knowledge—remained tenacious in Rutherford's memory: "It is many years ago since that evening, but while I write I am at the window still, and the yellow flare of the city is still in my eyes" (A, 113). For the reader, too, this is the most persistent image of White's "most dreadful sense of loneliness"—a solitary figure at an attic window, looking out at the cruel lights of the Unreal City, suspended, alien to any world.

The next morning, Rutherford's continuing disorientation is indicated in the description of his early walk. He wanders aimlessly "about the dreary intermingled chaos of fields with damaged hedges, and new roads divided into building plots" (A, 114). Before, he had seen this same scene as random, purposeless. The deepening of his depression is subtly suggested in the new emphasis. The changes in the landscape occasioned by building are now regarded as destructive—the hedges are "damaged," in a "chaos" of fields. In the afternoon, his despair increases as the winter light fades. The wind becomes "south-easterly, cold and raw," and the smoke from the river now "shrouded all the building plots in fog."

Rutherford also attempts to relate some part of his anguish in more denotative terms. The movement from a concrete, connotative description of the external world to a more abstract confirmation of what has been perceived and experienced is characteristic. Rutherford says that he cannot rationally account for his despair, but that night in Stoke Newington:

I was beside myself with a kind of terror, which I cannot further explain. It is possible for another person to understand grief for
the death of a friend, bodily suffering, or any emotion which has a distinct cause, but how shall he understand the worst of all calamities, the nameless dread, the efflux of all vitality, the ghostly haunting horror which is so nearly akin to madness? . . . I remember the thought of all the happy homes which lay around me, in which dwelt men who had found a position, an occupation, and, above all things, affection. I know the causelessness of a good deal of all those panic fears, and all that suffering, but I tremble to think how thin is the floor on which we stand which separates us from the bottomless abyss. (A, 113)

The "Everlasting No" has been endured by any number of writers, and resounded with particular intensity in the nineteenth century. Certainly White's melancholia has some features in common with the "vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death" that Carlyle's Teuflesdröckh knew, his "grim Desert" filled with the "howling of wild-beasts," where no Pillar of Cloud by day or Pillar of Fire by night "any longer guides the Pilgrim." It is reminiscent also of John Stuart Mill's mental crisis and of some of the lyrics of *In Memoriam*; and similar to Dorothea Brooke's night of anguish in chapter 80 of *Middlemarch* and to the "cliffs of fall, / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed" in Hopkins's desolation sonnets. But White's experience of the void has its own special quality, which is largely owing to its origin in a particular religious experience.

Of various modern interpreters of the experience of religious dread, Richard R. Niebuhr, in his *Experiential Religion*, comes closest to a description of the anguish felt by Hale White. After examining the testimony of such individuals as John Donne and Jean-Paul Sartre, Niebuhr concludes that the classic features of the dreading state of mind are "the experience of diminution," in which self-understanding offers no alleviation of the feeling, and a "sense of powerlessness," in which the external world is experienced chaotically. The sufferer is overwhelmed by the sense of "lying foundered or idle in a world of chaotic power of
[sic] stagnation.” The dreading individual “suffers in a world . . . of alien purposes and agencies where he is weak, a world of solid bodies where he has no substance of his own, a world of persons who direct themselves and one another while he lacks the capacity to direct himself. . . . [He] is expressing his awareness that he has no innate, inalienable share in that which is most real to him, his own life-course.” This is strikingly similar to White’s account of sinking under “nameless dread.” Others have found “position,” “occupation,” “affection”—what Niebuhr calls “direction.” They have found a place; he alone is unequipped and worthless. He has neither capacity to choose, nor ability to share in that which is “most real to him”—that is, vocation, a spiritual home, a living community. His emotional being is denied expression or fulfillment. Niebuhr argues further that “dreading is a revelation of infinite energy and of environing, shaping power that approaches us on alien terms. It is a revelation of what Coleridge called ‘the sacred horror’ of existence.” White says he glimpsed the “abyss” in Bunyan Meeting at the time of his adolescent conversion. At Stoke Newington, he fell through the thin partition and encountered for the first time, but certainly not the last, the infinite, alien energy that humankind can so little bear. Once in the abyss, the reality above it seems an illusion, a painted veil, a colored globe which gives the “illusion of solidity” but has no substance. This glimpse of daimonic energy can lead to madness—the fear of which obsessed White during his periods of melancholia. Niebuhr suggests, though, as do Carlyle, Tennyson, T. S. Eliot, and others, what White himself came gradually to realize: the experience of Dread, if survived, may ultimately be positive and creative. And it is common enough that “those to whom it is unknown lack ‘the great initiation.’” Bunyan writes that though the Valley of the Shadow is “a wilderness, a land of deserts, and of pits, a land of drought, and of the shadow
of death," yet "Christian must needs go through it because the way to the Celestial City lay through the midst of it."\(^{14}\)

In his efforts to identify a cause for his melancholia, White sometimes believed that his "phantom foes" were the result of physical weakness and dispersed with the return of health and energy. Certainly Zachariah Coleman's melancholy disappears with returning health, and is "evaded and forgotten" if not slain: "Health, sweet blood, unimpeded action of the heart, are the divine narcotics which put to sleep these enemies to our peace and enable us to pass happily through life. Without these blessings a man need not stir three steps without finding a foe able to give him his death-stroke" (RTL, 214–15). In White's own case, however, physical illness may have intensified mental distress, but while returning health often shifted his attention, it did not cure his chronic melancholia. We cannot conclude, therefore, that because a change of scene or renewed physical vigor alleviated despair, melancholia was the result of ill-health. Rather, White's physical ailments are often not the cause but the symptoms of spiritual anguish.

In general, White's analyses of his spiritual disease must be approached with caution, especially when he is writing for a public. Because one of his reasons for writing is to "heal" others, he is naturally inclined to discover reasons and cures for the fearful condition. He despised the "melancholy" literature he felt his own age excelled at producing, and he did not wish to be among those writers who could only describe the malady but stopped short of prescribing a cure. Moreover, White desperately wanted his attacks to have a physical cause. He could confront and challenge such a cause, but "objectless fearing" was paralyzing. Just as in his fiction he creates a focus for uncontainable and destructive emotions, so in his analysis of spiritual anguish he controls anxiety by giving it a definite cause and shape. He is thus able to objectify and detach himself from the threat to sanity and
identity, and in the intellectual exertion of the will he reminds himself that he is not yet overcome. The cure for melancholia, which White frequently ascribes to returning physical health, is thus related to the conscious desire for health, to a determined will: fresh air, a good sleep, a happy hour will make me better.

White says of Wordsworth's "hypochondriacal misery" that it was removed not by rational conquest of its supposed mental cause, but by "better health, by the society of his beloved sister, and finally by the friendship with Coleridge." This analysis is probably correct in the case of Wordsworth; it is clear that White wished it to be true in his own. When he argues that "certain beliefs, at any rate with men of Wordsworth's stamp, are sickness, and . . . with the restoration of vitality and the influx of joy they disappear," he is trying to convince himself that what cured Wordsworth will also cure Hale White. His real confusion about this question can be demonstrated by juxtaposing these hopeful assertions with the following remark from his essay "Talking About Our Troubles": "Fright is often prior to an object; that is to say, the fright comes first and something is invented or discovered to account for it" (P, 69; my emphasis). In his own search for wholeness and spiritual health, perhaps invention played as large a part as discovery.

The essays just discussed exemplify White's self-conscious effort to investigate the significance of his malady. Inevitably, the experience of dread is also a central fact in the lives of his fictional characters. The "great initiation" is required of them before self-understanding, change, or regeneration is possible. I suggested in the preceding chapter how White's imaginative energies work toward focusing, clarifying, or containing complex personal emotions. In his fictional exploration of dread, we discover that similar features of the experience recur and also see emerging a distinctive pattern of events associated with such episodes.
The pattern is as follows: first, dread seems to follow the rejection of the protagonist by a person or group, when a particular event places him or her in a position of severe isolation. Before the actual episode of melancholia, the sufferers feel dissatisfied with themselves and insignificant. Second, once it commences, dread is experienced as a fatal threat to identity. During the fall into the abyss, the sufferer feels diminished to the point of nothingness. Finally, dread includes the presence of a fixed idea, which appears to have nothing to do with the experience itself, but which haunts the sufferer to the point of madness. White continually attempts definition of this particular anxiety: "Hypochondriacal misery is apt to take an intellectual shape. The most hopeless metaphysics or theology which we happen to encounter fastens on us, and we mistake for an unbiased conviction the form which the disease assumes" (MP, 210).

This final characteristic, monomania, is central to the experience as a whole. It cannot be willed away. White wished to believe that he was not responsible for the images and ideas that engulfed him and plunged him deeper into panic: "The tyranny of the imagination is perhaps that which is most to be dreaded. By strength of will we can prevent an act, but no strength of will is able to prevent the invasion of self-created pictures" (MP, 227). The kind of idea or image that has such fatal power is significant, for it is usually one that symbolizes or indirectly comments upon the feelings of worthlessness involved in any attack of melancholic dread. A more detailed discussion of White's major fictional descriptions of melancholia will clarify these points.

The most striking accounts of melancholia, in addition to those of Mark Rutherford, are found in the portrayals of Zachariah, protagonist of The Revolution in Tanner's Lane, and the titular heroines of Miriam's Schooling and Catharine Furze. Zachariah Coleman, although in many ways a tribute to White's
father, also resembles his creator. Zachariah has two major attacks of melancholia, and both are religious in origin. In the first instance, he has quarreled with his wife and feels unloved and unblessed. He begins to question the foundations of his Calvinist faith and the justice of his lot. Feeling rejected by both God and wife, he seeks work in a strange town. Again he is rejected; potential employers "treated him as if he were not a person, an individual soul, but as an atom of a mass to be swept out anywhere, into the gutter—into the river" (RTL, 135-36). This triple failure, which leaves Zachariah without divine relationship, human affection or vocation, renders him psychologically vulnerable. He then gradually becomes haunted by a "vague, shapeless fear": "It was a coward enemy, for it seized him when he was most tired and most depressed. What is that nameless terror? It is a momentary revelation of the infinite abyss which surrounds us; from the sight of which we are mercifully protected by a painted vapour, by an illusion; that unspeakable darkness which we all of us know to exist, but which we hypocritically deny, and determine never to confess to one another" (RTL, 136-37). This description is by now familiar from our examination of Rutherford's experience of dread in the Autobiography. The questions Zachariah asks prior to his descent into the abyss are also questions of worth, purpose, and identity. "Does God really know anything about me?" he queries, and "Is not humanity the commonest and cheapest thing in the world?" (RTL, 136). This momentary glimpse of the "infinite abyss" below the illusory "painted vapour," this confrontation with "the sacred horror" of existence, desperately threatens the "very I." Like Bunyan's Pilgrim, Zachariah stands before the morass that has no bottom. At this point Zachariah recalls, as White himself did, others who had undergone similar perils and yet survived. Such memories give him courage: he could "connect his trouble with the trouble of others" (RTL, 137) and endure. In common suffering, through this communion of
the faithful, he finds comfort. The narrator here reminds us that Christian was not alone in the valley of the Shadow, and “by-and-by the day broke, and Christian cried, ‘He hath turned the Shadow of Death into the morning.’”

Zachariah’s second experience of melancholia occurs after his sojourn in a workhouse hospital. He is weak and depressed, without direction for his life. In this frame of mind he encounters Ferguson’s *Astronomy*, and there reads that one day the earth will fall into the sun. This single piece of information evolves into a fixed idea. The concept itself is not a random one, for it implies a threat to individual selfhood: the narrator remarks here that although Zachariah knows intellectually that the earth is not the center of the universe, his religious training had nevertheless “centred all his thoughts upon the earth as the theatre of the history of the universe” (RTL, 212). The individual soul is irrelevant if the whole world can easily and meaninglessly perish: “He dwelt upon these facts . . . till the ground seemed to disappear under his feet, and he fell into that strange condition in which people in earthquake countries are said to be when their houses begin to tremble” (RTL, 212–13). Here again White associates the experience of dread with the disorientation and impotence experienced in the face of a larger chaos. Zachariah’s being is diminished, and his faith is insufficient to calm his fear. His disorientation in the face of cosmic chaos is total: God appears to be indifferent, nonexistent, or malevolent. Ferguson’s *Astronomy* is the final blow to a frame already weak and uncertain. Renewed health causes Zachariah’s terrors to fade for the present, but the potential remains for another single fear to cast him into outer darkness.

There is reason to believe that the concept of eventual cosmic disaster annihilating the earth—and thus the theater of human history, and implicitly, God’s presence in history—was at this period a genuine horror for White himself. Six years after the publication of *The Revolution in Tanner’s Lane*, he wrote a
short story for *The Bookman*, entitled "Two Martyrs." The first martyr is Saint Agatha, whose prayer for strength in the hour of trial is answered by the coming of an angel, who remains with her as wild beasts attack her and is revealed to her at the moment of death. The second martyr is a twenty-eight-year-old schoolteacher, who sits alone in her room on her birthday, unloved and unknown. She is impelled to commit suicide shortly after she reads about the "shrinkage of the solar mass": "Of one thing, however, there can be no doubt—that all work means expenditure of energy, and that consequently a day must arrive when the sun will be cold and life on the earth will be at an end. Apart from geology, Helmholtz's hypothesis is entirely satisfactory." The narrator makes it clear that her deliverance (she "stands thinking for some minutes" and then puts down the bottle containing a sleeping potion) has a divine origin. As in Tennyson's "The Two Voices," the voice that arrests her hand "has to be taken absolutely on trust; it has nothing to say to the tremendous argument on the other side" (p. 154). As the heroine replaces the bottle, the fog over Hampstead Road begins to lift. In both this story and *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*, the religious dimension of the *idée fixe* is obvious: it points to the comparative insignificance of human life and undermines the possibility of a relationship between human beings and God. In the short story, though, White is more emphatic in his affirmation of the reality of that relationship than he is in the novel.

Miriam, the eager heroine of *Miriam's Schooling*, is also catapulted into the abyss by the power of a single threatening idea. One day she begins to read old books she has found in an upstairs cupboard. One of the authors is Swift. "For years, even to the day of her death, the poison of one sentence in the Tale of a Tub remained with her—those memorable words that 'happiness is a perpetual possession of being well-deceived'" (MS, 128). The sentence affects her so powerfully because Miriam, like
Zachariah, is in a condition of psychological vulnerability. Denied a relationship with the man she fervently desires, and married to one she cannot care for, she is feeling bereft and miserable. Like Zachariah and Mark Rutherford, she wonders if she will ever love and be loved in return. Standing before the Thames, she considers throwing herself into it. The narrator comments: "this was her first acquaintance with an experience not rare, alas! but below it humanity cannot go, when all life ebbs from us, when we stretch out our arms in vain, when there is no God—nothing but a brazen Moloch, worse than the Satan of theology ten thousand times, because it is dead. A Satan we might conquer, or at least we should feel the delight of combat in resisting him; but what can we do against this leaden 'order of things' which makes our nerves ministers of madness?" (MS, 112-13). Again we glimpse one reason why melancholia is so difficult to deal with: there is no definable object, no sin for which to atone. There is no palpable Satan to confront, only the ubiquitous "leaden order of things." All White's melancholiac sufferers, including Miriam, are surrounded and overwhelmed by "phantom foes." Miriam does not kill herself; she "held back and passed on." The narrator's apparently gratuitous comment on her extremity is Hardyesque: "the friendly hand which at the nick of time intervenes in romances did not rescue her." 18

The situation of Catharine Furze differs in detail but not in substance from that of Miriam. Catharine has not been, like the other characters discussed, rejected by a beloved, but the man she cares for is nevertheless unattainable. Her melancholia is precipitated by the sudden realization that her life will be passed without the fulfillment of mutual love, without commitment to something larger than herself. In this condition of mind, feeling depressed and worthless, she finds that time ceases to have ordinary meaning: "The interval between the present moment and death appeared annihilated; life was a mere span." She is overpowered by her new awareness of death, which sinks the
difference between right and wrong. Morality loses meaning and power; she feels paralyzed and unable to exercise choice: "Terrors vague and misty possessed her, all the worse because they were not substantial. She could not put into words what ailed her, and she wrestled with shapeless, clinging forms which she could hardly discern, and could not disentangle from her, much less overthrow" (CF, 299). These are presumably the hallucinatory images, the palpable imaginative form that a fixed idea took. In all the instances of dread under discussion here, the most frequent metaphor pertaining to these hallucinations is that of battle. The metaphor is a natural one, considering the incessant feeling of struggle experienced by the victim. Zachariah's illness is not destroyed by "some heaven-directed arrow" but evaded; Miriam is unable to feel "the delight of combat" that she might experience against a tangible enemy; Catharine "wrestles" with clinging forms which change shape and direction. The self is described as a besieged "citadel" (CF, 300). White comments that if we slay soldiers on a battlefield, that is the end of them; but there is no doing battle with ghostly enemies, "for they rise into life after we think they are buried, and often with greater strength than ever" (CF, 299). The experience is truly a waking nightmare. Eventually the unceasing struggle with phantoms weakens Catharine's physical health. Here, White allows that melancholia can be the cause of physical disease, not the opposite. Again, in Catharine's situation no conquest is possible by the reason, and the will is impotent. "Life is a conflict to the last," White writes in his biography of Bunyan. "When we get up in the morning we must say to ourselves that today will be as yesterday; the old tormenting thoughts and images will beset us till we are at peace in death" (B, 145).

These imaginative investigations of melancholia help to clarify the existential and religious dimensions of the experience of dread. They all concern questions of ultimate worth, purpose, identity, and direction. If sufferers experience momentary
freedom, they are soon again overwhelmed by the surrounding universe of chaotic power. The attacks of ghostly foes enchain them anew, and the only weapon is a hidden desire for health. Dread is seen to disorient the fearing individual in a variety of ways. Bunyan writes that in the Valley of the Shadow, Christian "was so confounded that he did not know his own voice" and could not tell if the blasphemies resounding about him issued from his own mouth. White, too, felt that in melancholia he was somehow alienated from his "very self." The internal division was so shattering that he could not always be sure who he was or who was suffering. In the period leading up to an attack, and during it, he was gradually stripped of every defense and illusion, until in the abyss he confronted the naked self. He now perceived the "I" in all its original darkness and depravity: the self was felt as nothingness. Dorothy White records in The Groombridge Diary how White's attacks were seen by an outside observer, one who loved him deeply: "That is the only way in which I can express these strange, nervous, hypochondriacal moods; he goes away from me; the body remains, but inhabited by a new and not very good or happy spirit; then suddenly the spirit goes, and be comes back. What a reunion it is!" (GD, 422). Her description of the soul lost in chaos, with its suggestion of demonic possession as the closest analogy, illuminates White's own terminology for his illness: he calls it his "personal Devil," or the "ancient Enemy." So he experienced it. In one of his wonderful reinterpretations of Bible stories, White explains the delusion of Saul in the same terms: "Now Saul was brave, the bravest of the brave, but he greatly feared at times what he called his Terror. . . . He was not mad as others are mad, for his senses never left him. . . . But something had caught him of which he could not rid himself. . . . all I heard was a strange word or two about a Face which haunted him and would not leave him." Saul begins to confound the "evil spirit from the Lord" (I Samuel 16:14)—the Terror—with the image of David,
and soon believes that if he could remove David, the "Terror would depart." In White's imaginative exploration of the problem, the mental process again involves what sanity necessitates: the location of a source or the creation of a tangible enemy seen to be invading the soul from without.

These fictional representations of individual attacks of melancholia directly reflect White's personal encounters with the disorder. More elusive of definition, yet more subtly pervasive in White's imaginative work, are his characters' general feelings of displacement and estrangement, and the situations that express them. Not only does Mark Rutherford feel, as John Lucas characterizes it, an "aloof distaste for the various [religious] communities he is supposed to serve," he feels alienated from his later journalistic work and distanced from the different secular communities with which he is connected. He is out of touch with his inner self and frequently feels that he lives, in Yeat's phrase, "where motley is worn." As a reporter, he has no sense of his audience ("I wrote for an abstraction; and spoke to empty space" [A, 152]); later, at the publishing house, he discovers that the work is antagonistic to his temperament. Zachariah Coleman is estranged from his wife after a few months of marriage, and from his religion somewhat later. When the march of the Blanketeers fails, he is exiled from London, and the momentary sense of communal belonging that the friendship of Caillaud, Major Maitland, and the Friends of the People had provided is shattered. He has to start all over again in Manchester. Here he discovers "how foreign, hard, repellent, are the streets in which he is a stranger, alone amidst a crowd of people all intent upon their own occupation, whilst he has none!" (RTL, 133). Miriam, too, is out of place in Cowfold, and Catharine Furze is described as being temporarily displaced: "Had Catharine been born two hundred years earlier, life would have been easy" (CF, 189). In Clara Hopgood, The Hopgood sisters, having lived in Weimar, are out of place in Fenmarket and are "almost entirely
isolated, for the tradesfolk felt themselves uncomfortable and inferior . . . in their presence, and they were ineligible for rectory and brewery society" (CH, 25). In London, Clara goes to work in a bookstore and is befriended by her employer: thus the "sense of exile and loneliness" (CH, 169) which the narrator says she shares with many of the city's immigrants is momentarily relieved. All these characters live on the boundary, peripheral to any community.

Lucas explains the "growing sense of separation from . . . [their] community" felt by characters in White's fiction as a standard late-nineteenth-century phenomenon, a function of the "mode of consciousness" that became "so crucial a feature of much Edwardian fiction." This may be so, but although White was writing in the 1880s and 1890s, the personal experience that is the foundation of his fiction occurred in the early 1850s. His characters move from the country to the city because he moved from the country to the city; they have attacks of melancholia because he did; they are alienated from both religious and secular communities because of White's conversion, heresy, and the permanent sense of exile that these events created in him. His fictional explorations of the phenomenon of communal displacement is a psychological necessity inflicted by his own experience. "I belong to the Tennyson-Carlyle-Ruskin-epoch," he wrote in 1897 (L, 170). Doubtless as he became older and grew with the aging century, his feelings of alienation and his sense that life was a constant struggle intensified. But the images of exile harvested in his novels were planted in Bunyan Meeting and the schoolroom at Stoke Newington.

Depression and "the horrors" were evils that beset White intermittently all his life. The onslaughts of melancholia appear to have lessened somewhat in the 1860s and 1870s, but recurred with great intensity in the 1880s. His letters in this decade contain several allusions to the dreaded visitations. In May 1884, he wrote to his son Jack that he had been ill for the last two months,
though “what is the matter I cannot say; excepting that I suffer greatly from unendurable depression, partly the result of physical causes, and partly due perhaps to Mama’s growing weakness and weariness which I cannot relieve.” Although he is aware that the day is sunny and fine as he writes, he cannot enjoy it: “I have not felt any stir from the summer; one of the few living creatures on this planet, I should think, whose blood has not been quickened by this generating weather. But I must wait and be still.”

In 1885, he wrote to Mrs. Colenutt, “I have been almost prostrated with my old complaints, inability to eat, drink, or sleep, and depression of the darkest shade” (L, 29). In 1886, in another letter to Jack, White explained his apparent neglect by referring to his melancholia: “For years I have not suffered from such continued gloom. I have hardly been able to open my lips except at the office, and at times I have scarcely known what I have been doing.” Interestingly, here he can assign no cause to his disorder: “What is the cause of it all, I cannot conjecture.”

A year later, in 1887, he wrote to Mrs. Colenutt that “I have had eleven months of terrible depression and complete nervous exhaustion, taking the form of all kinds of distressing forebodings and delusions. . . . It is wonderful how much misery can be got out of a human being” (L, 38–39). In the last months of the decade, he wrote Jack, “as we get older we find that endurance is the exact synonym for life.”

References to his melancholia also increase for a while during the period following 1907, after White became acquainted with Dorothy Horace Smith. In 1908, White wrote to Miss Partridge: “When you were here an enemy was approaching whom I had not seen for years, and I hoped he had left me for ever. He is the only enemy I really dread. Since you left he has gripped me. There is nothing to be done but to wait and be silent” (L, 266).

At first it may seem strange that melancholia was connected to his love for Dorothy. Yet this is really the most comprehensible and explicable of all his experiences of anguish, for these
attacks do have a definite cause. Initially, Dorothy visited Hale for part of the week. Each time she left, he felt greatly depressed. This particular anxiety disappeared when they were married. Further, White himself believed that his depression was so great because he loved Dorothy so deeply, and "intense light always makes black shadow" (GD, 40). The complexity of White's emotional response to Dorothy will be discussed in detail in a later chapter. Here I shall discuss only the obvious connection with his melancholia. White feared that Dorothy's love would turn to pity, that a vital young woman could not possibly love a man so much older and often ill. In the presence of her love he often felt worthless, and he inevitably oscillated between gratitude for the gift and angry resentment that this long-wished-for gift should have been granted so late. White tried to reassure Dorothy that she was not exactly the cause of his melancholy: "But the worst symptoms are depression and fear, and, as I live for nothing but you, you will understand how they are entirely now connected with you; an almost unbearable longing to have you always with me, a feeling that I ought to have had you long ago, the irreversible doom of age" (GD, 79). And in Dorothy White's manuscript Diary, she includes a letter White wrote in this period: "If I seem to you morbid and I may say wickedly miserable you must recollect it is always present to me that if I had been given you when I was young, my life might have been a blessed life. Now, I seem to be shown what it might have been."  

White feared that Dorothy's charity would require her to remain with him to the end, even if her feelings recoiled: "Do you know what is my trouble now, mental trouble I mean?" he asks: "that you should feel yourself bound to be loyal to me when I am a mere wreck" (GD, 114). He describes the "half-mad thoughts" (GD, 253) that possess him in her absence, and how even in the midst of extraordinary joy he is aware of the hidden threat of chaos: "with my happiness, there always intrudes a
Fear, a sinking of the heart because of my utter unworthiness. I know” (GD, 175).

During a lifetime of struggle with episodes of melancholiac dread, White naturally valued and turned to writers who were themselves acquainted with depression. He found that, among others, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and especially Carlyle were great resources. White venerated and cherished Carlyle, and preserved a letter from him among his greatest treasures. In this letter, Carlyle advises the young Hale to practice turning beliefs into facts: “It is idle work otherwise to write books or to read them” (P, 3). White and his father had paid Carlyle a visit in March of 1868, and the conversation cheered and sustained White, and lived in memory all his life. He declares in his essay on Carlyle (‘‘A Visit to Carlyle in 1868’’ ) that he ‘‘like all great men, . . . is infinitely tender’’ (P. 9).

Interestingly, White displayed a like attraction to the figure of Galileo. In his essay ‘‘How Can We Tell?’’ White discusses Galileo’s experience before the council anxious to condemn him for heresy. White’s characteristic critical approach to great writers or thinkers—presenting the ‘‘other side’’ of a contentious issue or event—is strikingly in evidence here. Galileo’s recantation, he argues, should be viewed in context and judged compassionately. The context is Galileo’s illness, his temperament, his daily situation: ‘‘the whole of his life he was the prey of miserable, sordid cares’’ (LP, 175). White concludes from his study of the man that Galileo, like Saul, was a melancholiac. Naturally, in White’s estimation, this fact explains and excuses a great deal: ‘‘He was afflicted with hypochondria, and at times doubted the truth of what he himself had seen. When Saturn’s ring became invisible in consequence of its being turned edgeways to the earth and he did not understand why it had vanished, he was in despair’’ (LP, 174–75; my emphasis). White’s sympathy is as sincere as his empathy is strong. He can enter into Galileo’s fear of being mistaken, into his general mental and physical debilitation at the
time. His recantation was the result of despairing confusion. "Who can tell," White asks, "what he thought, felt, and feared? Who can put himself in the place of this solitary old man, broken down with misfortune and disease, and perhaps self-distrusting?" (LP, 181). In Galileo's letter to his daughter following the recantation, White heard the echo of his own despair in the face of indecision: "My name is erased from the book of the living" (LP, 179).

White is clearly drawn to those writers who are familiar with these disconsolate moods, and even more to those who offer a path of deliverance from them. He greatly esteemed Milton, not only for the sublimity of his poetry, but also because he seemed personally to comprehend the feelings of Christ, tempted, alone in the wilderness. But it was Spenser, White felt, who understood the psychological complexities of the human struggle with evil more thoroughly than any other writer. Spenser celebrates the "untiring championship of the good" in The Faerie Queene, but "most attractive . . . is the constant desperateness of the struggle. Paynim, giant, and dragon are not overcome till the knight has made his last effort, and defeat, if it be not ultimate, is acknowledged" (LP, 17). Here victory over evil comes disguised and is not everywhere complete. The psychological realism of Milton and Spenser spoke resoundingly to White—they both comprehended "the facts." White believed with Spenser that the struggle with melancholia, temptation, terror, is always "desperate": the "ancient enemy" in its many forms may be evaded or momentarily vanquished, but in the self as in the world its total annihilation is impossible.

White also greatly valued Samuel Johnson, and especially because Johnson pointed the way to courage. "We all of us take to those who answer our questions," White exclaims about Johnson (L, 376). It pleased White also to discover that his heroes had similar qualities or characteristics. Johnson is significantly joined with Bunyan in White's mind by their common understanding of melancholia: "It is strange, by the way, that Johnson
resembled Bunyan. His spectres haunted Johnson, and the History of my Melancholy, which he once thought of writing but never dared to write, would undoubtedly have reminded us of another history by the author of the Pilgrim's Progress which he loved so well” (B, 30).

Hale White himself resembled Johnson, of course. Dorothy White noted the extensive similarities between the two. They shared “truthfulness, tenderness, humility (not surface but real)—piety I will put by itself—deliberation, care, pointedness” (GD, 9). I would add that both men also knew the terrors of dejection, and that the anxiety of both frequently had a religious source. While Johnson, however, often felt that he had not fulfilled “the conditions” for salvation, White feared that the covenant itself might be only a dream. White believed that Johnson had a history like his own, “too dangerous” for expression. Both men were painfully conscious of the truth of the statement in Rambler 14, that “it is the condition of our present state to see more than we can attain.” Johnson as well as White felt that though he may have done something toward “filling the time” properly, he had not, as Johnson puts it, done “what I required of myself.”

In his diaries, Johnson writes of “vain terrors,” of “disorders of mind,” and of his ever-present “scruples.” Again, both Johnson and White are able to analyze their own fears and record them with exacting fidelity; they contend with “terrors” and the fear of madness, yet are equipped with intellects capable of penetrating the most oblique of human defenses. Finally, the guilty fear that we have already seen in White, that with greater effort he might triumph, was also shared by Johnson. Like White, Johnson believed that despair was “criminal,” and for this reason constantly struggled for sanity and clarity. But, as Imlac remarks in Rasselas, “no disease of the imagination . . . is so difficult of cure, as that which is complicated with the dread of guilt.”

White’s own struggle is apparent throughout his adult life. In the Autobiography, the butterfly collector whom Rutherford
encounters exists in the novel primarily as an exemplum. He relates his personal history of adversity to Rutherford and tells how he one day determined to collect butterflies as a means of forcing his mind outward, away from introspection and despair. "Men should not be too curious," explains the collector, "in analysing and condemning any means which nature devises to save them from themselves, whether it be coins, old books, curiosities, butterflies, or fossils" (A. 107). This statement recalls Johnson's advice to Boswell on the same topic. Johnson approves any decent means that helps prevent the mind from preying upon itself, when reason and will are helpless. When Boswell asks if a man should, for example, take a course of chemistry to help himself, Johnson replies: "Let him take a course of chymistry or a course of rope-dancing, or a course of any thing to which he is inclined at the time. Let him contrive to have as many retreats for his mind as he can."32

White constantly attempted to follow the butterfly collector's advice and do anything positive and active rather than sitting disconsolate in his study, pondering the meaning of life. "He told me," writes Dorothy White, "that again and again he has only saved his mind by forcing himself to apply to some study, no matter how useless" (GD, 113). Eventually he came to believe that happiness should be carefully cultivated, even looked upon as a solemn duty. His diversions and evasions and general movements in the direction of emotional health were not always successful. In the grip of dread, mental paralysis, and self-absorption, White often could do nothing but endure his anguish in silence.

I have suggested that his fondness for Bunyan and Spenser was based in part on their understanding of the process of suffering and deliverance. Grace and deliverance do not arrive until the eleventh hour. White's own experience confirmed this perception. He found that when he was in extremis, powerless to help himself, relief seemed to come from a merciful source outside himself. His favorite psalm, to which he frequently
alludes in his work, is the twenty-second. Zachariah Coleman speaks for the author when, in the midst of despair, he calls it to mind. Both the psalm itself and the narrator's commentary help to illuminate White's feelings:

"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? . . . Our fathers trusted in Thee; they trusted, and Thou didst deliver them. . . . Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help. . . . Be Thou not far from me, O Lord: O my strength, haste Thee to help me. . . . Save me from the lion's mouth: and from the horns of the wild oxen Thou hast answered me."

"From the horns of the wild oxen"—that correction had often been precious to Zachariah. When at the point of being pinned to the ground—so he understood it—help had arisen; risen up from the earth, and might again arise. (RTL, 104-05)

White emphasizes the main point again, in the journals: "'The inwardness of a few of the Psalms is profound. 'Yea, from the horns of the wild-oxen thou hast answered me.' . . . From between their very horns!'" (LP, 118). He is obviously attracted by the visual strength of this image. Through the suffering itself, between the horns of the enemy, deliverance comes. He endures because help has arrived in the past. White remarks that Christian is able to survive in Doubting Castle because he remembers his previous victories (B, 140); with each conquest over evil and suffering, hope suffuses his terror. Mr. Bradshaw, in The Revolution in Tanner's Lane, reminds Zachariah that the Red Sea did not part until "the enemy was upon them." Only then did the waters divide, "the very waters . . . which before were their terror" (RTL, 129-30). As he recognizes that salvation occurs through the suffering itself, White affirms what we have seen suggested earlier—that the "great initiation" contains the seeds of positive fruit.

White's sense of the meaning implicit in "the horns of the wild oxen" also illuminates the frequent and seemingly gratu-
itous allusions in his work to the sudden terror of drowning. In _The Early Life_, he describes his own experience of this terror. One day, while swimming, he was “suddenly overtaken by a mad conviction that I should never get home.” Although he was physically strong, he says: “my heart began to beat furiously, the shore became dim, and I gave myself up for lost. ‘This then is dying,’ I said to myself, but I also said—I remember how vividly—‘There shall be a struggle before I go down—one desperate effort’—and I strove, in a way I cannot describe, to bring my will to bear directly on my terror. In an instant the horrible excitement was at an end, and _there was a great calm_” (EL, 53). The episode, which seems to prefigure so much of White’s later experience, is, of course, not only one of physical endurance but of spiritual deliverance. In the short story “Michael Trevanion,” the spiritual dimensions of the event are made more explicit. Robert Trevanion swims out to sea to save Susan, the young woman he loves. Although a good swimmer, “he was suddenly seized with a kind of fainting and a mist passed over his eyes. . . . He was on the point of sinking, when he bethought himself that if he was to die, he might just as well die after having put forth all his strength; and in an instant, as if touched by some divine spell, the agitation ceased, and he was himself again” (MS, 160). The pattern is now clear: one cannot will salvation, but courageous endurance may evoke divine response. Drowning is yet another image of the spiritual abyss. White transforms the literal life event into a symbol of his deepest fear: sinking into the darkness and helplessly drowning there alone in a watery world of “chaotic power.” The sea, like the “abyss,” lies beneath the conscious intellect. The swimmer may at any time be seized with sudden terror and begin to fall or sink into nothingness. After he has put forth all his strength in endurance, the “divine spell” causes agitation to cease, and there is “a great calm.”

When White mentions his melancholia in private letters he almost invariably concludes with a comment such as: “I must
be patient and wait." The decision to endure is, at such times, an expression of enormous courage. In more than one place White describes courage as the "root of all virtue" (B, 125), as that which "dares and evermore dares in the very last extremity" (RTL, 25). During his long life, he often endured in feeble hope that the burden would be "loosed from off his shoulders." White's son Jack records a moving vignette of his father's waiting for release: "One morning—I cannot remember the date, but I believe it was about the same time [1887]—I arrived home at six o'clock on a visit. I found my father sitting at the writing table in his study, beside the window, at Park Hill. In response to my enquiries, he complained of ill-health and depression, but added 'I feel at times as if a word would dispel it all.' "

In her biography of White, Catherine Maclean suggests that in his moments of greatest despair White waits on God. When White is in the clutch of this unspeakable angst, he endures, waiting for some revelation, however fragmentary, that will confer meaning on his suffering. "A word would dispel it all": surely he waits for the Logos, which he terms the "indwelling Christ"; that is, for the experience of grace that will break down the gates of his psychological prison, shatter the isolated egocentric self, and free it into relationship—with others, with God, with its own central being. In silent endurance he awaits the Power that will free him from the Enemy—for God, who had before and might once again turn the Shadow of Death into morning.