This Body of Death

THREE

I should like to die not entirely. I should like that part of me to live that rejoices in these clouds, this field of barley, these surrounding trees. But there is another part which I so heartily wish were dead that in order to annihilate it I would joyfully sacrifice the first.

—Last Pages From a Journal

SAINT PAUL... IS HARD, and I never read him without feeling that I have to stretch myself mightily in order to accommodate myself to him” (L, 124), White wrote to a friend. Yet it is clear from his work that he had a special feeling for the teachings of Paul. This is natural, for the Epistle to the Romans is the foundation of Calvinism, to which White eventually returned and which he reinterpreted. Because he needed a religion that was the fruit of individual experience, both Paul’s conversion and his love of Christ, as well as his understanding of fallen human nature, spoke resoundingly to White. Some of White’s characters also have occasion to confront Saint Paul and come to terms with him. Catharine Furze, for example, hesitantly offers her interpretation of the Reverend Cardew’s sermon on Paul’s query “who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:24). She suggests that Paul is attempting to characterize the opposition of “the two natures in him by the strongest words
at his command—death and life.' He prays to be delivered, she argues, not from the death of the body but from "death-in-life" (CF, 119–20). Later in the novel, these words recur to her, now vibrant with personal meaning. At this point in the story, Catharine, overwhelmed by her love for Cardew, feels the approach of despair. She has just left the deathbed of Phoebe Crowhurst and has come to realize that her intellectual superiority to her servant and friend means nothing. The patient, selfless life that Phoebe crowns with a hopeful death are beyond Catharine's capacity. She begins to comprehend the extent of her own self-absorption: "in all her purposes, and in all her activity, she seemed to have had self for a centre, and she felt that she would gladly give up every single advantage she possessed if she could but depose that self and enthrone some other divinity in its place. Oh the bliss of waking up in the morning with the thoughts turned outwards instead of inwards! Her misery which so weighed upon her might perhaps depart if she could achieve that conquest. She remembered one of Mr. Cardew's first sermons, . . . and she cried to herself, 'Who shall deliver me from the body of this death!'" (CF, 327).

"The body of this death," then, is death-in-life, self-consciousness, self-concern, egocentric despair. Here as elsewhere, White transfers the emotion he understands so well to his heroine. I have already suggested that some part of White's introspective tendency may be attributed to the ambivalent heritage of Calvinism. The creed that "concentrated my thoughts upon myself" may have disappeared, but the habit of self-examination remained, and brought with it a demoralizing sense of worthlessness. White's encounter with melancholic dread in Stoke Newington further complicated this propensity. Whether the attack of melancholia engendered the temperament that I shall be referring to as "self-consciousness," or whether that temperament helped to precipitate melancholic attacks, is difficult to determine. I suspect that the predisposition toward
self-absorption existed prior to White's expulsion, and was activated, as it were, by the right combination of circumstances. In any case, once in existence, this self-consciousness became habitual. The problem was complicated by White's integrity. He clearly recognized the egotism of a *patior ergo sum* attitude, and often feared that his anguish was mere self-indulgence that might be conquered with a greater effort. Thus guilt accompanied excessive self-concern. He certainly did not believe that great personal distress made him in any way superior to less sensitive and more carefree spirits. "I would barter my books and shoals of 'ideas,' " he cried to Dorothy, "for the ability to laugh as those girls are laughing, shop-girls in their Sunday clothes" (GD, 104).

"With . . . [his] natural tendency to believe the worst" (A, 115), White had no expectation of discovering someone who would take his place in Stoke Newington, but he was in fact quickly able to find a replacement, and thus managed to escape "the horrors" for a while. Having closed the door both on the ministry and on teaching, he decided to try publishing. Several London publishers turned him away, but at length he was offered a job as assistant to John Chapman. The ironic conclusion of his ministerial training was to become a vendor of "theologically heretical" books (EL, 82). White's career to this point in fact encapsulates the major trends of nineteenth-century biblical criticism: he was expelled from university for questioning the divine inspiration of Scripture and hired by Chapman for disbelief in miracles. "As the New College council had tested my orthodoxy," he remarks sardonically, "so Chapman tested my heresy and found that I was fit for the propagandist work in No. 142 and for its society." His answer to a question concerning his belief in miracles was "allowed to pass," but "my scepticism would have been more satisfactory and more useful if it had been a little more thorough" (EL, 83). There is a similar comment in the *Autobiography*, where Chapman appears as the publisher Wollaston: "his mind so constantly revolved in one circle, and
existed so completely by hostility to the prevailing orthodoxy, that belief or disbelief in it was the standard by which he judged men” (A, 119).

White both worked and lived at 142 Strand between 1852 and 1854. It is clear from the Autobiography that he found his work during that period entirely uncongenial—irritating intellectually and antagonistic to his temperament. “Particularly loathsome,” writes Rutherford, “was that part of it which brought me into contact with the trade” (A, 121-22). He found “subscribing” Chapman's publications, “that is to say, to call on booksellers and ask how many copies they would take,” to be “most disagreeable” (EL, 83). He also found it difficult to perform his clerical duties with the expected speed and accuracy, and came to feel more and more inadequate, frustrated, and incompetent in his work. Fearing that he might not be able to please his employer or the other members of the Chapman household, he soon became incapable of effort. Rutherford analyses the feelings provoked by making a trivial clerical error:

I thought that if I was incapable of getting to the bottom of such a very shallow complication as this, of what value were any of my thoughts on more difficult subjects, and I fell a prey to self-contempt and scepticism. Contempt from those about us is hard to bear, but God help the poor wretch who contemns himself. How well I recollect the early walk on the following morning in Kensington Gardens, the feeling of my own utter worthlessness, and the longing for death as the cancellation of the blunder of my existence! (A, 130)

Both this kind of statement and the downward spiral to despair it describes are characteristic of White's response to self-conscious anxiety. He was sensitive to the mildest reproof or criticism, and he also judged himself harshly. The pattern is one that recurs in his mental history. Here, because of a trivial mistake, his self-confidence vanishes. He concludes that he is useless
in this aspect of his work. If he is worthless in small things, he must be worthless in large ones; ergo he is totally without value and may as well die. This distorted logic, which catapults him into the abyss, is recognizably the process of a depressed mind.

The great compensation for his abhorred work at Chapman's, however, was the society and friendship of George Eliot, still Marian Evans, who was then assistant editor of the Westminster Review. She appears in the Autobiography as Theresa, Wollaston's niece. Mark Rutherford describes her as brilliant, original, and compassionate. In the novel, after yet another error in his work, Rutherford breaks down in Theresa's presence and finally confesses his loneliness, his fears, his feelings of uselessness and failure. Theresa responds at once with kindness and affection, corrects his error, and assures him of her friendship and concern. Marian Evans's compassionate response at this moment of crisis lived in White's memory all his life. "Blessed are they," cries Mark Rutherford, "who heal us of self-despisings. Of all services which can be done to man, I know of none more precious" (A, 132). George Eliot proved herself in this instance to be as generous as her own "large-souled" Maggie Tulliver, and as noble-hearted as Dorothea Brooke. The narrator's description of Lydgate's confession to Dorothea in Middlemarch resembles White's own response to George Eliot at this time: "The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character." It is not surprising that immediately after his hysterical confession, Mark Rutherford finds himself "entirely overcome with unhesitating absorbing love" for Theresa (A, 132).

White's intimate understanding of the destructiveness of self-contempt is acutely revealed in his fiction. His disturbing "Confessions of a Self-Tormentor" best illuminates his feelings about George Eliot at this time and explores how his self-hatred
extended outward, poisoning all he touched. Many of White's stories are written in self-judgment as well as in self-exploration, and this one is no exception. "No sorrow of genius," exclaims the narrator, "is greater than the daily misery of the man with no gifts, who is not properly equipped, and has desires out of all proportion to his capacity" (MP, 114). White continually longed for some talent or ability that would distinguish him in the eyes of the world and give him value in his own. In both his fiction and his journal entries, he describes the secret envy and misery he felt in the presence of those who had proved themselves masters of a field, however humble. In "Confessions of a Self-Tormentor," he presents a character who has "an extraordinary passion" for botany. The botanist is deaf and dumb, but to the narrator these afflictions appear trivial in comparison with his talents: "the one thing I saw was his mastership over a single subject. Gradually my incompleteness came to weigh on me like a nightmare. I imagined that if I had learned any craft which required skill, I should have been content. I was depressed when I looked at the watchmaker examining my watch. I should have walked the streets erect if there had been one thing which I could do better than anybody I met. There was nothing: no purpose was intended by God through me" (MP, 112). Thus the self-tormentor destroys himself. Vocation, divine intention and purpose, individual value—all are lost. The mental process of depression illustrated in this passage has already been observed in Mark Rutherford: in his periods of self-loathing, the rest of the world—beauty, genius, goodness, skill—seems by its very existence to connive at reducing him.

It is in this frame of mind that the protagonist meets Mrs. A, who is clearly another fictional portrait of George Eliot. The treatment of their relationship is as painful to the reader as it is bitter to the author. Mrs. A takes notice of the unhappy young man, as Theresa had befriended Mark Rutherford. She talks to him and attempts by her friendly interest to overcome his
self-deprecation. One evening she invites him to accompany her to see Rachel, the great actress. The protagonist petulantly refuses, claiming falsely that he knows no French. In his distress, he believes that her kindness proceeds from pity and a sense of duty rather than from a genuine liking for him. At length he stops seeing her. The story implies that the disinterested friendship offered by George Eliot was not enough for White. Like Mark Rutherford and the young self-tormentor, he was haunted by the vision of an ideal relationship, characterized, in Rutherford's terms, by "devotion" and "sacrifice." In this story, the narrator's pride and jealousy thwart his real desire, and he perversely rejects Mrs. A's generous affection simply because it is not total. By his cold and obstinate behavior he proves to himself that he is unlovable, and thus destroys the possibility of the very relation he desires. Although "it was actually painful to me to neglect her," he writes, "I forced myself to it, or to put it more correctly, the Demon of pure Malignity . . . drove me to it" (MP, 121). The narrator's belated regret for his self-destructive attitude is intense: "Oh! when I look back now over my life and call to mind what I might have had simply for taking and did not take, my heart is like to break. The curse for me has not been plucking forbidden fruit, but the refusal of divine fruit offered me by heavenly angels" (MP, 119–20). This period of his life and the incident concerning Rachel's performance are also related in *The Early Life*. Here White is much more restrained and elusive, but the yearning is still present. "It is a lasting sorrow to me," he concludes, "that I allowed my friendship with her to drop, and that after I left Chapman I never called on her" (EL, 83).

Readers of Hale White's fiction have naturally been intrigued by this relationship and have attempted to discover to what extent White's affection for George Eliot was romantic. While it is impossible to speak with certainty on this matter, it seems more than likely that Marian Evans's compassionate kindness briefly transformed Hale's admiration into love. His fictional
tributes imply some ambiguity of feeling: Mark Rutherford "worshipped Theresa" and was "entirely overcome with unhesitating absorbing love for her" (A, 132), but the narrator of "Confessions of a Self-Tormentor" remarks that although he found Mrs. A "attractive as a woman" and was drawn by her "delightful manners, subtle intellect, expressive grey eyes," he "did not fall in love with her" (MP, 117). Perhaps the twenty-one-year-old Hale did not himself know the precise nature of his attachment to this extraordinary and brilliant woman some twelve years his senior. His feelings may well have been complex, and it is possible that he recoiled from Marian Evans's liaison with George Henry Lewes when he learned of it. Certainly the extent of White's later detachment from her indicates jealousy, or at least humiliation and dismay. It is also probable that this unworldly, innocent young man was shocked by the easy morality of the Chapman ménage. Interestingly, in the Autobiography George Eliot, as Theresa, is transformed into Wollaston's niece, and there is no mention of any other members of the household. Mark Rutherford never gets the opportunity to reveal his passion for Theresa. Shortly after his nervous collapse, she departs for the country, from which she probably "would not return for some time" (A, 132). This evasion, as Claire Tomalin's account implies, may have been White's method of coping with Marian Evans's departure for the Continent with Lewes in July of 1854.

Some years later White attempted to renew the lapsed friendship by writing to George Eliot, asking if she could help find work for William Maccall (former editor of The People and White's friend), whom they both had known in the early years. Although George Eliot did help Maccall, she had Lewes answer White's letters. She died on December 22, 1880—White's birthday, a fact that he records with sorrow in his journal—one year before the publication of the Autobiography, in which her genius is celebrated. At her funeral, White's distress was extreme. Like the remorseful self-tormentor at Mrs. A's funeral, White lamented
his neglect (and, I suspect, his youthful self-righteous judgment) of Marian Evans.

White admired and championed George Eliot for the rest of his life. In 1898, he wrote to Miss Partridge that rereading George Eliot's novels had revived his "old passion" for her. "I am glad to find," he exclaims, "that my feeling towards her has lost none of its intensity, and that, as a whole, what I thought of her five-and-thirty years ago is what I think of her now" (L, 180). In his essay "George Eliot As I Knew Her," he remarks that she was personally attractive ("Her hair was particularly beautiful, and in her grey eyes there was a curiously shifting light, generally soft and tender, but convertible into the keenest flash"); and expresses his conviction that "if there was any sincerity . . . in the person with whom she came into contact, she strove to elicit his best" (LP, 132). Even his Athenaeum essay on John Chapman (1894) is made an occasion for praise of George Eliot. He speaks, typically, of the "tenderness and defiance which were really so characteristic of her."8

White was infrequently healed by the magnanimity of others. He wanted to love and be loved, to be considered unique, yet at the same time he feared failure and the veiled judgment that he was without value. Amorphous guilt, self-hatred, and perverse coldness complicated his search for freedom and inhibited the realization of his spiritual potential. Mark Rutherford's description of the feeling of worthlessness that succeeds his rejection by a former friend is characteristic of White on this subject: "I . . . dwelt upon the conviction which had long possessed me that I was insignificant, that there was nothing much in me, and it was this which destroyed my peace. We may reconcile ourselves to poverty and suffering, but few of us can endure the conviction that there is nothing in us, and that consequently we cannot expect anybody to gravitate towards us with any forceful impulse. It is a bitter experience" (A, 192). This passage reveals that identity, in the deepest sense, is threatened in such
moments of anguished self-consciousness. I have already suggested that White's self-hatred was complicated by an elusive sense of guilt. He often felt that he had nothing particular to offer life. Thus he felt irrelevant in the universal scheme, and his sense of cosmic isolation often stunned him into silence. The guilt he experienced was rarely for what he had done but for who he was. In his short story "The Fire at Milldeep Manor," White explores the feelings of a young man who has rejected his fiancée because he is jealous of her attachment to her family. When he realizes his selfishness, he is appalled at his action and confesses: "I have never been able to feel myself a sinner in the common acceptation of the word. I have not habitually broken the commandments. But, as my head lay upon Margaret's knees, I thought that for me there could be no forgiveness. My guilt was not so much something I had done as something which I was. Repentance seemed a stupid word" (LP, 86).

In the two previous chapters, I have suggested that White found in the creative process ways of channeling and transforming emotions that threatened to engulf him. Similarly, he managed to give vague guilt a concrete focus through the patterns of his fiction. In many of his stories White creates a dramatic situation in which a particular sinful action—and therefore clearly focused, understandable guilt—provides the opportunity for repentance and expiation. Solutions to the problem of "who I was" were rarely offered in life, but in his art the wished-for forgiveness is felt immediately by the characters and vicariously by the author. Various short stories—"Atonement," "The Sweetness of a Man's Friend," "The Fire at Milldeep Manor," "James Forbes," "Confessions of a Self-Tormentor," "A Letter to the Rambler," "A Dream of Two Dimensions"—chart a movement from the conviction of sin through repentance, forgiveness, and atonement. In all of them, the author's nebulous guilt is concretely realized.
The narrator of "Confessions of a Self-Tormentor" repents his selfish perversity at Mrs. A's grave and then expiates his sin by renewing a relationship with his neglected aunt. He shows that he has now learned to accept love where it is offered. In "A Letter to the Rambler," the narrator rejects his fiancée because he thinks she is too lowborn for the people he wishes to impress. He, too, sees his error, repents, and publicly confesses his love. He then embarks on a supremely happy marriage. The protagonist of this story exclaims at one point that he now understands experientially both how Peter came to deny Christ, and Peter's subsequent repentance (MP, 124–36). Similarly, James Forbes abandons his beloved because she believes in "the creeds," while he is a fierce agnostic. In another marriage he is utterly unhappy, but lives to see his beloved on his deathbed. He repents his past egotism and has a few hours of peace in her company before he dies (P, 170–73). "The Fire at Milldeep Manor," "A Dream of Two Dimensions" and "The Sweetness of a Man's Friend" all concern young men who for various reasons reject the women who love them. Their sins are selfishness, the prodigal waste of human affection, and intellectual pride (A, 25). All the heroes eventually realize the value of the love they have squandered, repent and are forgiven, and become changed thereafter in feeling and conduct.

Of all these stories, the best illustration of White's fictional struggle to create an object for amorphous guilt and realize imaginatively a means of expiation is the extraordinary and unsettling "Atonement." Here White powerfully explores the protagonist's feelings of selfishness and cruelty. Feeling himself misunderstood by his family, the narrator storms out of the house one evening, brutally kicking and cursing the family dog who has risen to accompany him. The animal howls with pain but nevertheless follows the master who has injured him. During the narrator's angry walk, the dog falls down and dies. A strange dread fills the heart of the narrator. All night he has an image of the dead animal
in his mind's eye and feels "the terror which accompanies a great crime": "I had repaid all his devotion with horrible cruelty. I had repented, but he would never know it. It was not the dog only which I had slain; I had slain Divine faithfulness and love. That God damn you sounded perpetually in my ears. The Almighty had registered and executed the curse, but it had fallen upon the murderer and not on the victim" (P, 176–77). Shortly after this event, the narrator begins to feel a strange, dull pressure in his foot. He is haunted by his evil deed: "I got it into my head . . . that only by some expiation I should be restored to health and peace." Yet he does not know how: "Unhappy is the wretch who longs to atone for a sin and no atonement is prescribed to him" (P, 177). In life, White found no specific deed to repent and no means of atonement. In this story, the sin is unequivocal, and the road to repentance becomes suddenly clear. A fire breaks out in a neighboring house, and upon hearing that a dog is trapped in the blaze, the protagonist rushes into the flames. In rescuing the animal, he falls on the painful foot and breaks his ankle. The injured foot refuses to heal and at length must be amputated. The narrator gratefully accepts the dog from his owner, who doesn't want him, and takes the creature home and cherishes him. The pattern is straightforward: sin, remorse, repentance, atonement, grace. "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out." Guilt for "who I was" is transformed in these fictions.

Lest this discussion of White's self-consciousness and its imaginative manifestations become oppressive, it is well to pause at this point and recall that he often exaggerated his limitations, that his contemporaries found him generous, kind, and affectionate, that his children wrote of him with more than ordinary love and respect, that his letters reveal an extraordinary gift for self-forgetful friendship. "He never talked about himself in the usual petty way most of us do," Dorothy White remarked, "his talk was always of a non-personal kind; I mean, it was not necessary that he should be the hero of every story" (GD, 461). Such
remarks are important, for they remind us that while we are con­cerned here to understand how a man perceives himself, and how a low assessment of his individual value affects his spiritual life, the autobiographical consciousness gives, perforce, a partial view of its subject.

A study of White’s letters to his friends, or of Dorothy’s remarks about his conversations, places his harsh self-portrait in perspective. Not only did he avoid talking about himself or his troubles unless greatly pressed, but both Dorothy and other acquaintances speak of his exceptional humility. Referring to White’s dislike of being the center of attention, Dorothy writes: “It is not fear of blame, but an instinctive dread of notice, praise or blame. He always likes to be treated as if he doesn’t exist” (GD, 303). (Of course this is what we would expect from a man who harbored such feelings of worthlessness.) Dorothy also shrewdly suggests that White’s allusions to more or less external (and impersonal) ailments were a way of shielding his inner life from view. “‘I am sorry I can’t shake hands’ (when his hand was a little gouty),” he might remark, or “‘I’m blind in one eye’ (when a small vessel burst); which merely meant, so I believe, ‘Please look at my gouty hands and my blind eye, and not at my soul’” (GD, 466).

White’s children have also told various attractive stories of their father in a self-forgetful mood. Even when we temper our assessment of these with an awareness of what might have been owing to filial duty, they are still striking in the context of White’s self-deprecation. Jack White, for example, says that some of his happiest times were spent in his father’s company on summer holidays, when White would read aloud from the Aeneid as he walked. At such times, Jack insists, “his talk became animated, discursive and inspiring as I have known no other man’s to be.” Willie also comments on the energy and largeness of his father’s conversation: “never have I known anyone with wider interests.” In spite of his father’s melancholia, Willie comments further that
“the most vivid impression of him in my mind is that of a man sitting by the fire enjoying the company and talk of his children and friends.”

This domestic idyll is tempered a little, however, by his daughter Molly’s remark to Dorothy about her father’s unfailing courtesy: “Papa never goes out of the room or down the stairs in front of me, however miserable he is” (GD, 27n.).

It is White’s letters, however, more than anything else, that prompt us to reevaluate his character. Here we can truly understand what Dorothy White meant when she referred to the “non-personal” quality of his daily discourse. Lady Robert Cecil, White’s friend of later years, speaks for many of his acquaintance in maintaining that while White had “an ingenious habit of self-deprecation,” his friends “only saw an intensely critical interest in life at almost all points.” This catholicity of interest, to which his children also testify and which Lady Robert documents, is most evident in his letters. White liberates his mind from the fetters of destructive, habitual self-concern by devoting himself to the subject most likely to engage the interest of his correspondent. His own mental range, and the extent of his informed understanding, is astonishing. Reading his correspondence is like opening door after door in the corridor of a palace: the reader begins to get a sense of the true dimensions of a large and complex intelligence. To the gentle Philip Webb, architect and friend of Ruskin, White writes primarily about art, architecture, aesthetic questions, nature; to George Jacob Holyoake, the radical political reformer, he writes mainly about political questions and public figures; to his friend Sophie Partridge, a schoolmistress, he writes about literature, often brilliantly; to the formidable Scottish philosopher J. Hutchison Stirling, whose daunting and candid intellect exposed all uninformed conclusions, White writes easily about philosophy and religion; to his oldest friend, Mrs. Colenutt, he writes about children, domestic concerns, daily life.
But though the records of these moments of self-forgetfulness qualify our understanding of White, it is clear that anxious self-consciousness was the habitual condition of his mind. I have suggested that a propensity to self-torture and amorphous guilt are among the manifestations of his anxiety. There were others: fear of death, indecisiveness, and a continual sense of social estrangement. These characteristics are reflected, in one form or another, in his fiction.

II

In 1908 Dorothy White wrote that she believed her husband's only fears were "hypochondriacal fancies": but "of death I know he has no fear" (GD, 96). I believe that she was right—then. Reuben Shapcott also affirms that Mark Rutherford "gradually relaxed his anxiety about death by loosening his anxiety for life without loosening his love of life" (A, 139). This attitude, however, was the hard-won (and, I think, occasional) fruit of his maturity. Terror of death and fear of future annihilation dominate the thinking of young Rutherford, absorbing him "even to the point of monomania" (A, 75). Hale White became less obsessed by the matter as he grew older, but somber speculations about mortality persist in his novels and stories. In these fictions, too, concern with death is often transformed into a preoccupation with parting and separation.

In the Autobiography, Rutherford's discussion of death is characteristically Victorian: he cannot completely abandon the hope of individual immortality, but the exact "how" of the translation eludes him. The concept of bodily resurrection, he writes, was "more than I could ever swallow in my most orthodox days" (A, 76), and what the rationalist doctor in Catharine Furze sarcastically defines as "the soap-bubble theory"—that is, "that somewhere in us there is something like a bubble, which controls everything, and is everything, and escapes invisible and gaseous
to some other place after death” (CF, 305)—is equally unaccept­able. Rutherford believes that body and soul are united and feels that immortality without the survival of memory and intellect would be worthless. Like Tennyson, Rutherford recognizes that Nature preserves not the individual but the type, and fears that possibly “all shall go.” Without the benefit of the philosophy of Spinoza, which gave such hope to his creator, Rutherford wonders at this point “why this ceaseless struggle, if in a few short years I was to be asleep for ever?” (A, 76). Mardon’s role in the novel is partly to strip Rutherford of the old consolations of his faith. As I noted in chapter 1, Mardon is, like Reuben Shapcott, the fictional expression of one of White’s own internal voices. As a result of his tuition, Rutherford despairs: all the longing for God, the love of His creatures, the struggle for self-conquest, all to end in the grave? “The position of mortal man,” he writes, “seemed to me infinitely tragic. He is born into the world, beholds its grandeur and beauty, is filled with unquench­able longings, and knows that in a few inevitable revolutions of the earth he will cease.” This recognition is made more painful if one has loved. At death we are told that the “heart and mind” of the beloved “absolutely are not” (A, 76). At Mardon’s grave, Rutherford tries to be content with the knowledge that his friend will live “as every force in nature lives—for ever; transmuted into a thousand different forms.” Consolation of this kind is insufficient. It may be true, Rutherford thinks, but nevertheless “I can only accept the fact of death in silence” (A, 136). This response to death is in fact a good deal more typical of the mature Hale White than is the detached perspective attributed to Ruther­ford by Reuben Shapcott.

Several readers have commented on the astonishing facility with which White kills off his characters. An extraordinarily large number of his central figures die suddenly (and sometimes gra­tuitously)—a fact that is owing in part simply to White’s limited ability to construct plots. He recognized his difficulties in this
area all too clearly. Of the protagonists of his novels, Mark Rutherford, Catharine Furze, and Clara Hopgood all die. Where White excels, however, is in his exploration of the survivor's remorse and the sufferer's fear of being forgotten after death.

In *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*, Zachariah's first wife, Jane, and second wife, Pauline, both die, though he lives on. But George Allen's situation is the more excruciating. In the months following his young wife's death he struggles alone with self-accusation, haunted by her image. He is obsessed with little things that he had not noticed at the time: "turns of her head, smiles, the fall of her hair—oh, that sweet sweet brown hair!" He feels both remorse—"Gone, for ever gone—gone before he had been able to make her understand how much he really loved her"—and the terror of vacancy—"was she not in heaven? Would he not see her again? He did not know." His active imagination nearly destroys him: "He thought of her lying in her grave—she whom he had caressed—of what was going on down there, under the turf, and he feared he should go mad" (RTL, 361–62).

White is equally effective when describing his persistent fear of being forgotten. In his daily notebook he attempted to reason himself out of it, writing under the rubric "Wisdom for old age": "Let not the thought sadden you that six weeks after you are in your grave those to whom you are now dear will be laughing and living just as if you had never existed. Why should they not? Are you of such consequence that they should for ever wear mourning for you?" (MP, 299–30). This particular anguish is brilliantly realized in *Catharine Furze*. In the death of the servant girl Phoebe, Catharine's own death is anticipated. The narrator's powerful vision of human transience delineates White's fear. Here no allusion is made to a possible eternal life—the only immortality projected is continued existence in the memory of those who loved us, and that, too, is not of long duration:
She lies at the back of the meeting-house, amongst her kindred, and a little mound was raised over her. Her father borrowed the key of the gate every now and then, and, after his work was over, cut the grass where his child lay, and prevented the weeds from encroaching; but when he died, not long after, his wife had to go into the workhouse, and in one season the sorrel and dandelions took possession, and Phoebe's grave became like all the others—a scarcely distinguishable undulation in the tall, rank herbage.

(CF, 325)

This stunning passage is a good example of White's finest and most characteristic writing. With lyrical simplicity and restraint he creates both the conviction and the experience of the relentless passage of time: we feel the impossibility of halting the obliterating process of nature; we sense the agony implicit in the necessity of borrowing a key to the churchyard. The ephemerality of human existence is also syntactically realized in the long single sentence, as each phase of human love and memory is contracted to a clause, and the sentence itself moves inexorably on toward the finality of its concluding image—Phoebe's individual being swallowed up in the only community White was always sure of. Although the central thought of the passage is identical to the notebook entry quoted above, the whole experience of the thought is transformed utterly by this act of imagination. The description is both pessimistic and dignified, again reminiscent perhaps more of Hardy than of any other nineteenth-century writer. White is trying out a possibility by visualizing and feeling the conclusions of his logic. Anticipating the worst is, typically, one of his "strategems of defence" (A, 250).

White's fiction contains several moments like the description of Phoebe's grave. Closely related to the fear of death, too, is his insistence on the anguish of parting from loved ones, even for a few days or weeks. Here again, the intense distress White felt in his own life because of parting or separation finds the appropriate image or situation in his fiction. His letters to his
children and later to Dorothy are painful reading when he describes what he feels when he leaves them. Jack White quotes a letter from his father, written in 1887, from likely, where White had gone for a day or two on sick-leave. His son joined him for a while. His father was "mostly silent" during their long walks. When Jack had left, White wrote: "As the train rolled off into the dark, stifling thoughts rose up in me, thoughts with which it is impossible to argue and the only thing to be done is to turn aside and think others if possible."  

The grief he felt at parting is recreated in a recurring image in his fiction. Zachariah takes leave of his imprisoned friend Caillaud in *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*, knowing that he will never see him again. The narrator here departs from the particular situation of Zachariah to explore the universal dimensions of ordinary human grief: "There is a pathos in parting which the mere loss through absence does not explain. We all of us feel it, even if there is to be a meeting again in a few months, and we are overcome by incomprehensible emotion when we turn back down the pier, unable any longer to discern the waving of the handkerchief, or when the railway train turns the curve in the cutting and leaves us standing on the platform. Infinitely pathetic, therefore, is the moment when we separate forever" (RTL, 228). White makes the same narrative transition from the particular to the general in *Catharine Furze*, where Tom Catchpole parts from Catharine, realizing that she will never love him and feeling that he will never see her again:

What makes the peculiar pang of parting? The coach comes up; the friend mounts; there is the wave of a handkerchief. I follow him to the crest of the hill; he disappears, and I am left to walk down the dusty lane alone. . . . She whom I have loved for half a life lies dying. I kiss her and bid her good-bye. Is the bare loss the sole cause of my misery, my despair, breeding that mad longing that I myself might die? In all parting there is something infinite. We see in it a symbol of the order of the universe,
and it is because that death-bed farewell stands for so much that we break down. (CF, 288)

The passage charts a progressive alienation: White moves from the poignant image of friends parting to the death of one member of a married couple to cosmic isolation—"something infinite."

He is equally unhopeful in his short story "The Sweetness of a Man's Friend" where the tale-within-a-tale seems to exist in order to review "all that is hidden in that word never." An engaged couple decide to separate when the man comes to feel that he has a call to the priesthood. This character's letter to the narrator explores now familiar territory: "Is it possible to express by speech a white handkerchief waved from the window of the railway train, or the deserted platform where ten minutes before a certain woman stood, where her image still lingers? There is something in this which is not mere sorrow. It is rather the disclosure of that dread Abyss which underlies the life of man" (LP, 43).

We already know what the abyss represented for White: the void, nothingness, spiritual death. The Autobiography was published in 1881, The Revolution in Tanner's Lane in 1887, Catharine Furze in 1893, and "The Sweetness of a Man's Friend," published posthumously, was presumably written in the last years of his life. From these dates we can safely conclude, I think, that death and parting were persistent concerns of White's maturity. The "symbol of the order of the universe" was realized for him in the haunting image of a solitary figure waving a handkerchief from a train as the beloved slowly disappears from view. The image, as we have seen in Jack's reference to his father's letter, had a biographical origin. Sadly, it again became a reality in his relationship with Dorothy. He suffered acute distress when she left him: "I watched you till the last glimmer of you vanished as the train went under the bridge. Ah! those powers of darkness! But it is wrong to put down on paper what
I go through." The image conveys the essential aloneness of human beings and tends to suggest that human mutuality, God's presence in history, purposeful existence, are all illusions and dreams. The "facts" are "a dark street, crowds, hurry, commonplaceness, loneliness."

The intense pessimism of White's fictions cannot be ignored. A manifestation of his self-conscious personality, it was exacerbated by attacks of acute depression and intensified by his religious isolation. But, as I hope to prove in later chapters, this nihilism is not the whole story. Out of White's continual struggle toward emotional and spiritual freedom came an equally powerful conviction of human worth and genuine hope for the possibility of reconciliation between human beings and God.

In addition to fear of death, another consequence of anxious self-consciousness was a tendency toward indecision. "Hale says," writes Dorothy, "that he always sees the two sides to a question so clearly as to be unable to arrive at any positive conclusion" (GD, 21). Insight did not, alas, confer the power to decide and act. White continually judged this characteristic indecision as weakness. On the one hand, he thought it was better to reach a conclusion about a question and act upon it than to possess knowledge sufficient to incapacitate the mind and will. On the other, he was aware that some questions admit of no solutions, and that possibly the best course for a man like himself was to admit that "there are multitudes of burning questions which we must do our best to ignore, to forget their existence" (A, Preface, 2d ed., vii). This is the advice of the fictitious editor of the Autobiography, Reuben Shapcott. White admitted the good sense of Shapcott's advice but was often unable to follow his own counsel. Shapcott remarks that "metaphysics, and theology, including all speculations on the why and wherefore, optimism, pessimism, freedom, necessity, causality, and so forth" are all ruinous; yet precisely these subjects drew Hale White like a magnet.
In his Shapcott moods, he nevertheless stringently judged this irresolute swaying back and forth. The narrator of the short story "The Love of Woman" declares: "I am and always have been a timid mortal, capable of brooding, of thinking, not incapable of ideas and of deep emotions, but with nothing of the hero in me, and, worse, with not even the beginning of one—that is to say, with no capacity for decision. I have suffered for it. I have endured the lashing of self-contempt" (LP, 99–100). We see again the vicious circle: introspection and self-concern breed impotence of the will, which generates even greater self-hatred. Thus we find White constantly remarking the difference between thinking and worrying. Certainly one reason why Spinoza appealed to him so greatly was the philosopher's power of sustained and thorough exercise of thought. Byron's poetry invigorated White for a related but different reason. Byron, he writes, "was a mass of living energy, and therefore he is sanative. Energy, power, is the one thing after which we pine in this sickly age. . . . Strength is what we need and what will heal us. Strength is true morality, and true beauty." There was no vacillation in Byron, as White perceived him: the poet is "perfectly unconscious, as unconscious as the wind" (P, 147). It is worth noting that this praise of Byron comes from White's essay "Byron, Goethe, and Mr. Matthew Arnold" (1881), in which he criticizes and condemns Arnold's judgment of Byron. Yet it is Arnold, of course, whom White resembles in many respects, not least in his acute awareness of the debilitating effects of self-consciousness and in his yearning for a more spontaneous and energetic character. He recognized, too, the dangers inherent in the melancholy literature of his time, and often felt, like Arnold's Empedocles, that he was one of "Thought's slaves, and dead to every natural joy" (II, 249).

Finally, White's self-conscious temperament contributed to the social and personal isolation that he frequently lamented. Rutherford "wanted a friend who would sacrifice himself to me
utterly, and to whom I might offer a similar sacrifice.’’ He found companions who cared for him, but ‘‘I was thirsting for deeper drafts of love than . . . they had to offer’’ (A, 24). He complains of his ‘‘chafing irritation at mere gossip’’ and his dislike of the trivial ‘‘chatter’’ of ordinary social discourse (A, 254). White, too, wanted to ‘‘pour’’ himself out to others with freedom and confidence, and encouraged his friends and children to write to him about what they ‘‘really hoped, feared or loved.’’

In my second chapter, I indicated that White's characters often share their author's sense of exile and reflect his experience in their alienation from both religious and secular communities. The Autobiography, for instance, may be viewed as a study in the varieties of human loneliness. Not only Rutherford, but minor characters—Miss Arbour, Ellen Butts, Taylor—allude to their social isolation. Similarly, Zachariah Coleman finds it difficult to make friends; Catharine Furze becomes ‘‘impatient . . . of those bars which nowadays restrain people from coming close to one another’’ and wishes she could cry out to the person talking to her to ‘‘put away his circumlocutions, his forms and his trivialities, and to let her see and feel what he really was’’ (CF, 189). In the character of Baruch Cohen, who falls in love with Clara Hopgood, White explores his own temperament and predicament most thoroughly. He substitutes the situation of the nineteenth-century English Jew for his own social and religious alienation. Baruch had ‘‘often made advances; people had called on him and had appeared interested in him, but they had dropped away.’’ Some part of his estrangement, White argues, is owing to race, but ‘‘partly also the cause was that those who care to speak about what is nearest to them are very rare, and most persons find conversation easy in proportion to the remoteness of its topics from them’’ (CH, 182). Like White, Rutherford, Catharine, and Zachariah, Cohen ‘‘generally kept himself to himself’’ (CH, 183) because he so desperately wanted the ‘‘key which unlocks the mystery of things’’ (CF, 189) to stand revealed
through ideal human communion. Cohen's feelings—he is a widower, his son is now gone from home, he is a Jew in Christian England, he is neither genial nor witty—are revealed with the sureness of long practice. In White's final novel, the experience of isolation, the longing for community and mutuality, the situation of the man who cannot dedicate himself to God and who finds ordinary social conversation insufficient, are examined with scrupulous care.

Neither White nor Cohen is at home with verbal irony. They can only speak the truth as they see it, and they feel uncomfortable with insincere, well-bred conversation. Both desire what White often calls "reconciliation." White wished to know of the other "how is it with thee?" He wanted what he refers to as an "Emmaus walk" with his friends. Significantly, he found it difficult to talk with any freedom to those for whom a spiritual life was inconsequential. Describing the visit of an acquaintance, Mrs. Dannreuther, to his friend Sophie Partridge, White suggests that he can form only a limited friendship with someone who cannot understand "the religious experiences of this country": "Now, although many of us may more or less widely have separated ourselves from the Christianity of the day, Christianity in a way is in our very blood and all our thoughts are coloured by it. We cannot, or at least I cannot, come very near to a person to whom the Bible is nothing whatever, and all the literature that has clustered around it mere ecclesiastical and professional jabber" (L, 146). In such remarks we can see the vacuum in his life created by the absence of a religious community. White's judgment of Henry Sidgewick's Memoir, for example, shows how completely alienated he was from a secular frame of mind, from "brilliant" people to whom "religion is not a necessity, a passion or an interpretation, but an intellectual exercise." The purely intellectual inquiry of many nineteenth-century thinkers seemed to him "a curious attitude—weighing his religion! Imagine these literary, clever people discussing over coffee or wine the value
of the mediatorial idea or what substitute can be provided for the supernatural as a sanction for law!” (L, 276; cf. LP, 316).

Religion was too important to be allowed to dwindle into raw material for social chat. White wished to share his soul but was often made to feel that such an article was not wanted. The loneliness occasioned by these barriers is tersely recorded in a late journal entry: "What a superstition it is which forbids people who really think to talk to one another on religious matters! Not a soul has said a word to me for years about God” (LP, 289). The same isolation is voiced by the narrator of his short story "A Letter from the Authoress of ‘Judith Crowhurst’": "Unfortunately it is not in management or morality that we crave companionship. It is in religion and in the deepest emotions that we thirst for it” (MP, 140).

It is within this context that we must interpret White’s strange remark to Dorothy that she was "the only person who does not mind my being so serious. I can’t help being serious” (GD, 125). He refers to more than Victorian moral earnestness here. Serious is the word he uses to allude to that added dimension—the spiritual life—alive and visible in some people. Dorothy’s freedom and magnanimity of spirit attracted White instantly; he saw that she truly moved and had her being in something larger than her individual self. This recognition afforded him security, as well as endowing Dorothy herself with a precious mystery. He trusts—like Lydgate with Dorothea Brooke—that such a person will perceive and judge him in the light of something great and noble. "Seriousness,” the felt awareness of another’s spiritual life, frees his imprisoned ego, and he is able to talk of things that are of ultimate concern to him without feeling embarrassed, pious, or foolish.

This communion was essential to a man of White’s temperament, and the need had been there from the beginning. In a moving letter to his father in 1853, he writes about the "cold negativism” that he encountered at Chapman’s. He was begin-
ning to see the "heartless emptiness" in men and books that was to hurt him throughout his life. Historical biblical criticism may after all be correct, but if the writer's soul is not in his work, White remarks, one feels only "vague dissatisfaction and disquiet." Feeling as if "a film were between you and the author which you could not pierce," and willing to give anything "to get really at the heart-felt thinkings of the man," White turned again to the Bible: "here I am heart to heart, hand to hand with a real human being. I embrace no cloathed, disguised man but feel the blood beating and the touch of warm flesh." In 1908 White was to tell Dorothy that he had not altered much since the 1850s, that he felt most at home in a "religious world" (GD, 15). Only in a religious world were self-realization and reconciliation possible—yet he was largely shut out from one.

This chapter has to this point outlined some of the most obvious manifestations of White's anxious self-consciousness and noted how they are transmuted into the themes and images of his art. We are now in a position to understand to what extent these manifestations contributed to the autobiographical act that initiated his career as a novelist. I am therefore going to leap ahead some twenty-five years for the remainder of the chapter, to examine the climactic self-conscious moment of White's life.

III

White published The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford, Dissenting Minister in 1881, when he was fifty years old. In the two preceding decades, he had been under enormous pressure in his daily life. His son Jack states that these years were difficult and strenuous ones for his father, who was not able to live on his salary at the Admiralty until 1879, when he was promoted to the position of Assistant Director of Navy Contracts. Before that date, he was obliged to supplement his income by writing for various newspapers, an occupation "which was always
distasteful to him.' His wife, ill for many years, was now slowly and painfully dying of multiple sclerosis. Because of her illness, many household cares and tasks also fell to her husband's lot. After his regular work was done, White frequently went to the House of Commons in his capacity of reporter, rushed home for a hasty meal, and spent the evening preparing his articles. After a few hours of broken sleep, Jack writes, his father rose as early as four o'clock: "The fire place in his study had a row of gas jets round the base to enable him to light the fire easily; after his bath he made himself a cup of cocoa in an aetna, and then, in those early morning hours, he read and wrote as his own spirit moved him. . . . Nevertheless, when he had an article to finish, even those hours were invaded, and he would rouse me up at 6 o'clock to meet the newspaper train on its arrival at the station, and bring him the morning's papers. Sometimes the article was finished in the waiting room at Victoria Station on his way to the Admiralty." 21

At a time of life when other writers are at the peak of their creative powers and are engaged in the production of their major works, Hale White felt that he had accomplished nothing. A personal intrusion into his fine essay "Notes on the Book of Job" (1885) reveals the bitterness he felt as he saw his life being consumed by arduous, uncongenial work and the difficulties of his domestic situation:

Happy is the man . . . who sees some tolerable realisation of the design he has set before him in his youth or in his earlier manhood. Many there are who, through no fault of theirs, know nothing but mischance and defeat. Either sudden calamity overturns in tumbling ruins all that they had painfully toiled to build, and success for ever afterwards is irrecoverable; or, what is most frequent, each day brings its own special hindrance, in the shape of ill-health, failure of power, or poverty, and a fatal net is woven over the limbs preventing all activity. The youth with his dreams wakes up some morning, and finds himself fifty years old with
not one solitary achievement, with nothing properly learned, with nothing properly done, with an existence consumed in mean, miserable, squalid cares, and his goal henceforth is the grave in which to hide himself ashamed.22

In the 1870s, White raised his head from his desk and realized that time was passing swiftly, and his life was being devoured. Instead of making the grave his goal, however, he determined to break the “fatal net” that bound him. He wrote to preserve the sanity and identity of a self now threatened on all sides. His external life was limited and oppressive; the act of writing became an expression of personal freedom, an act of rebellion. Thus he extended the boundaries of his daily existence, and through this activity denied the definition of himself as office drudge and man of trivial affairs.

The thesis of Georges Gusdorf’s essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” seems especially applicable to Hale White: “The man who recounts himself is himself searching his self through his history; he is not engaged in an objective and disinterested pursuit but in a work of personal justification. Autobiography appeases the more or less anguished uneasiness of an aging man who wonders if his life has not been lived in vain, frittered away haphazardly, ending now in simple failure. . . . So autobiography is the final chance to win back what has been lost.”23 Through the process of memory White tried to redeem the lost time, to find some meaningful order and symbolic pattern in the waste and emotional chaos of his life, to discover at last the elusive, beckoning, reconciling “word.”

White told Dorothy that “he remembers writing the first book, the Autobiography, at ‘extraordinary high-pressure.’ He was then at work every night at the House of Commons, and he wrote in the mornings, 4:30” (GD, 51). Under this “high-pressure,” White did more than momentarily stay the fleet passage of time. He not only preserved identity by recalling and
interpreting himself, he also created it. Through the writing, another dimension was added to William Hale White. He created Mark Rutherford, who became from that point on a permanent (though continually growing) part of his creator. In this, of course, White resembles many other autobiographers, who have "discovered, asserted, created a self in the process of writing it out." Mark Rutherford, freed from the psychological restraints imposed by temperament and heritage on Hale White, was brought into active being to write several more novels and stories.

There are other, related reasons why White was impelled to recall and recreate his inner life at this particular moment. He was becoming aware of his increasing personal isolation and, I think, beginning to feel the approach of death. In 1880, George Eliot died, an event that grieved White severely. White’s children were also growing up and moving away from home. Willie had already gone, and in 1882 Jack would leave home to begin his career. Mrs. White’s half-sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Street, whom White had loved and revered, died in 1877. His mother had been dead for several years; in 1882 his beloved father would follow her. In his discussion of Pilgrim’s Progress White states that "Bunyan takes it for granted that the life of a man who is redeemed by the grace of God is a pilgrimage to a better world." Although, White suggests, this is the leading thought in Bunyan’s book, "it is one which we find most difficult to make our own. We can follow him through all the incidents of his journey; we know the Valley of Humiliation, the Valley of the Shadow, and Doubting Castle, but we are not sure, as he was sure, that the wayfarer will reach a celestial home at last" (B, 169–70). The autobiographical act is, then, also a way of trying to ensure, if not a celestial home, at least a form of immortality. Through the creative impact of his own memory he would continue to exist in the memories of others, and survive his death.

The autobiographical act, therefore, both "fixes" his life and extends it, both recalls and creates a self, both stays time and
This Body of Death

In the Autobiography, the question that underlies all White's work—"what can I do to be saved?"—often connotes only "how can I survive?" Survival, however, was not only the sustaining question but the dynamic force behind the book's inception. White had reached the point where he had either to try to overcome his spiritual and emotional exile or wither away. The need to share the "serious" dimension of being, the wish to break down the barriers separating him from the world, became a pressure strong enough to require some decisive action. Rutherford, as we have seen, could "pour" himself out to his congregation and receive no response—"not a soul kindled at any word of mine." Moreover, "nobody more than myself could desire self-revelation," he writes; yet he produced, in conversation, "blank silence in the majority of those who listened to me" (A, 23). The desire for confession, self-revelation, relationship, had long been part of White as well, but no ideal friend appeared to offer him the necessary attention and sympathy. In the Autobiography, White gives meaning to his life not only through the powerful interaction of imagination and memory but also by creating in the unknown anonymous reader the missing "perfect friend," the responsive and empathic congregation. He reenters suffering and reaches out across the void to transform, in the act of writing, his alienation. As one of White's characters puts it, "expression is as indispensable to me as expiration of breath." Further, "with me expression in some form or other, if the thing which should be expressed is to live, is an absolute necessity." 26 Here, the thing that requires expression if it is to live is White's most vulnerable self, his most intimate life.

Mark Rutherford introduces his autobiography self-consciously, armed with justifications for writing about himself that are familiar from other confessional works. His reasons, however, are neither camouflage nor the false modesty that announces a successful life. They are entirely sincere. First, he claims that his experience may have some historical value in that
he is able to give a personal account of nineteenth-century Non-conformity. But, more important, "I have observed that the mere knowing that other people have been tried as we have been tried is a consolation to us, and that we are relieved by the assurance that our sufferings are not special and peculiar, but common to us with many others. . . . some few whose experience has been like mine may, by my example, be freed from that sense of solitude which they find so depressing." (A, 2) Freed from a sense of solitude. This White himself had sought. He was consoled and relieved by knowing that other human beings, especially his favorite writers—Bunyan, Johnson, Wordsworth, Carlyle—had survived the Valley of the Shadow.

Thus if White wrote out of a need for confession and from a desire to create meaningful order, he also wrote to liberate others from the prison of self and heal them from their "self-despisings." The question whether or not a person should give voice to his suffering was one that troubled him a great deal. In some places he remarks that we should abstain from burdening others with our troubles, that we should first endeavor to help ourselves. Yet one of his characters, Mrs. Fairfax, exclaims that "it is difficult for anybody to know whether his suffering is excessive: there is no means of measuring it with that of others" (P, 254).

The idea that confessional autobiography is justified by the help it can bring to others may be understood as a modern reformulation of the didactic intention of many seventeenth-century sectarian autobiographies. White's understanding of Bunyan's motives in writing _Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners_ suggests that he believed he shared Bunyan's justification: "It is a terrible story of the mental struggle of a man of genius of a particularly nervous and almost hypochondriacal temperament; whose sufferings, although they are intertwined with Puritanism, have roots which lie deep in our common nature. Bunyan's object in writing it was not the pleasure of
self-analysis, but to strengthen those of his friends who had suffered his temptations” (B, 9; my emphasis).

Moreover, like Zachariah Coleman, who, in recollecting the trials of Bunyan’s pilgrim, is able to “connect his [own] trouble with the trouble of others” and “give it a place in the dispensation of things” (RTL, 137–38), White discovered that by aligning himself with Bunyan he did much more than imitate: it is a wonderful paradox that this self-creative, individualizing act also served to connect him with a spiritual community. 29

But White also clearly recognized how profoundly his experience and his didactic impulse differed from Bunyan’s, and this awareness is reflected in the diffidence with which White treated his own book. He invented Reuben Shapcott to serve a number of purposes. Among other things, Shapcott allows White to remain at a distance from his own experience and to appear indifferent to the fate of his written record. “I have decided . . . to let the manuscript remain,” says Mark Rutherford, “although I will not take the responsibility of printing it” (A, 1–2). This disclaimer suggests an uneasiness both about the intimate nature of his testimony and about its secular quality, its lack of overt religious intention. White understood that Bunyan wrote for the edification of his fellow Christians, “to show,” as Paul Delany says, “the conscience-stricken faithful that no sin was too great to be redeemed by Christ” (p. 92; cf. p. 88). He knew that Bunyan’s autobiography was, as Elizabeth Bruss has it, “at best a side effect of his actual intention to give witness to abounding grace in the place where he had discovered it.” 30 White is acutely aware that although his own apologia is similar—he also is trying to “strengthen those of his friends who had suffered his temptations”—it is not the same thing. The creed that had “concentrated my thoughts upon myself, and made me of great importance” (EL, 59), also helped to engender the Autobiography. But the relationship with God that was the center and meaning of Bunyan’s experience was, if not totally lacking,
substantially transformed in White's own. His work neither glorified God nor testified to his own salvation, and, lacking the religious sanction, White feared that his confessions might prove merely solipsistic ravings. The shift from "examination of the soul" to "examination of the self," as John Morris characterizes the gradual secularization of the autobiographical impulse,\textsuperscript{31} intensified White's anxiety. His uncertainty about the justification for all his writing may have its source here: "I wish I had never written stories," he exclaimed to Dorothy: "they are somewhat of a degradation" (GD, 176). The "degradation" lies in the confessional nature of all his works. Was it only an end in itself? Had he only egoistically exposed his soul without sufficient reason?

There is, however, no question of White's integrity. Mark Rutherford does not portray a life of success and triumph. Rather, the Autobiography gives expression to humiliation and loneliness, despair and longing, vanity and fear. The narrator of Albert Camus's \textit{The Fall} warns against the dishonesty of the confessional writer: "Authors of Confessions write especially to avoid confessing, to tell nothing of what they know. When they claim to get to the painful admission, you have to watch out, for they are about to dress the corpse."\textsuperscript{32} But "dressing the corpse" is just what White is incapable of doing, and it is for this reason that many readers have found him so valuable. Self-justification there is, but dishonesty never. For White, remarks Valentine Cunningham, writing "was a species of personal testimony. 'As far as Bunyan knew he spoke'; and as far as White knew he too was to speak."\textsuperscript{33}

White makes himself exceptionally vulnerable in his confessions, wondering throughout "of what use is it . . . to present to the world what is mainly a record of weaknesses and failures." His self-perception is harsh: "Mine is the tale of a commonplace life, perplexed by many problems I have never solved; disturbed by many difficulties I have never surmounted; and blotted by
ignoble concessions which are a constant regret" (A, 1). He fears being known but at the same time requires recognition. The suffering reader, the potential perfect friend, might silently offer not only understanding but forgiveness—not for what he had done but for who he was. "If I had been given you as a wife when I was thirty I would never have let the public hear a syllable from me," he told Dorothy (GD, 176). This remarkable statement is best understood not as a repudiation of what he had written but as a partial explanation of why he began to write at all. If he had had the complete, renewing love of Dorothy, his confessional might not have been the reading public. He felt, at the distance of some years, that the need for confession and forgiveness, for recognition and acceptance, the attempt to remain spiritually alive that drove him to the recollection and recreation of his life, might have been realized in her affection.  

Two other aspects of White's autobiographical work remain to be discussed: his use of a pseudonym and the form of the Autobiography. I have already suggested one reason for his pseudonymous detachment from his work. He felt there was some "degradation" in confessional writing: he had demanded, albeit behind two masks, that attention be paid to his suffering. He was therefore remarkably secretive about his authorship. His son writes, "He hated crowds, disliked mankind in the mass and detested publicity, hence he published his novels under a pseudonym, and if anyone wrote to him about them he got his daughter to reply, saying that her father had not among his acquaintances any one of the name of Mark Rutherford." His first wife was unaware of his novels until years after the publication of the Autobiography; he then confided to her that he had published books under an assumed name, and that their son Jack could read them to her some day.  

His daughter Molly, born in 1869, remarked that she did not know that her father had written novels until her twenty-first birthday. White was reticent with his family and even denied his authorship to close
friends, although he words his disclaimers with care for strict truth: "Tell—, not as [a] message from me but as one from yourself, that you understand I disclaim it," he writes to Mrs. Colenutt. "I have never owned the book you name, and should be quite justified in denying its authorship" (L, 11). Dorothy White remarks that White disliked speaking to anyone but her about his books, and "even to me he speaks of them in an odd unaccustomed way, and not as if he had written them. He said, 'You will find the story in that book Miriam's Schooling' etc. etc." (GD, 36). He regretted that his authorship had ever been known, because the awareness of others' knowledge inhibited him in the further exploration of that dimension of himself known as Mark Rutherford and added to his already oppressive burden of self-consciousness. He could write to the anonymous reader with some freedom, but the moment he thought of family and intimate friends peering over his shoulder, "the result is perversion."39

It is illuminating to realize that the two people who learned first about the authorship of the *Autobiography* were not White's intimates, but men with whom he corresponded and whose good opinion he valued deeply: J. Hutchison Stirling and George Jacob Holyoake. White had been corresponding with Stirling since 1874 but had not yet actually met him. In January 1883, Stirling wrote: "I am obliged by your kindness in sending me your book. It is an unusual one, and I have read it with pleasure. The general theme, of course, is the prevalent one of Doubt. ... I should never have thought it yours: there is scarcely a clue in it to your studies now; not but that you do allude to Germany, & you use the word universal, I think, twice."40 Eight pages of careful commentary on the *Autobiography* follow. It is evident from this correspondence that White sent the Stirlings in 1884 the story that became "A Dream of Two Dimensions," and also that Stirling read the *Deliverance*, and knew of the other novels.41 Stirling's letter lends support to the view that a
pseudonym gave White a means of exploring areas of himself that he could not normally reveal; but further, it suggests that his hunger for recognition and praise from men he admired was stronger than his natural reserve. Of course, since Stirling did not know how much the Autobiography and Deliverance really comprised White's own spiritual experience, White could be perceived by him simply as the gifted author of a book on the theme of Doubt. Counting on the same misapprehension, White could tell Holyoake that "I simply designed to depict a victim of the century."42

White was also not as indifferent to the fate of the Autobiography as he pretended. He wrote Holyoake that "'The New York Nation' had the best review which has appeared as yet."43 And when, early in their friendship, Dorothy Horace Smith wrote out her response to the Autobiography, he valued it enough to cut it out and paste it in his "Dorothy Book." Again, although he stressed his desire for anonymity, a letter to William Dean Howells (who had reviewed the Autobiography in Harper's New Monthly Magazine) indicates how much White wanted and appreciated recognition. After stating his strong wish for anonymity, he concludes, "I should be less than human did I not feel gladdened and exalted by such a criticism as that now before me by a man in your position and with such a name. Again I thank you, thank you with—to me—unaccustomed emotion; and as to such a friend I cannot wear a mask I beg to subscribe myself—devotedly yours—W. Hale White."44

The tension between White's diffidence and his need for recognition also appears in his attitude toward his nonfictional writing. These pieces he at least acknowledged, though his letters about them are distressing reading. He wants friends or children to know he has written a book or essay; he would like to hear their responses but is afraid of bringing anything to their attention that they might find tedious or inferior. Although he shrank from criticism, even worse to contemplate was the possibility that his work would be praised from a sense of loyalty or obligation. He
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anticipates objections, therefore, by making self-effacing or disparaging remarks before anyone else can. A few examples will suffice to illustrate my point. In 1895 he wrote to Mrs. Colenutt about a Times report of a paper on sunspots that he read to the British Astronomical Association. White first draws her attention to it and then erects a shield: "It is not particularly interesting. The paper was only as long as this note, and it took me two years to write it" (L, 71). Again to Mrs. Colenutt he writes in 1899 that he has "amused . . . [himself] lately" by writing a preface and notes to a volume of Coleridge manuscripts. He assumes that it will be "of no interest whatever to the ordinary reader" and that not "a dozen copies will be sold." Characteristically, he concludes, "if it had possessed any value other than that which it possesses for a biographer or editor I would have sent you one. As it is, I am sure you would not think it worth the postage" (L, 92-93). And when he sends his friend Philip Webb—with whom he often exchanged books—a copy of his John Bunyan, he spends a good part of the letter justifying the gift: "I was asked two years ago to write it and refused, knowing that I was unfitted for the task. Some time afterwards the invitation was renewed. . . . But with the utmost sincerity I also say that my essay fails. It wants strength, patience, and historical knowledge. It wants ten years' more work. Say nothing about it. It is a pity to pay postage back" (L, 327-28)—and more in this vein.

We have seen that White in the Autobiography is consciously responding to, if not directly imitating, the tradition of Puritan autobiography. It is also clear that he was influenced by the autobiographical writing of his own century. In particular, he appears to have used the narrative form of Sartor Resartus as a model for the Autobiography and Deliverance. This influence is most evident in the invention of masks and voices that help to preserve anonymity and allow the self-conscious autobiographer a measure of confessional freedom. As Carlyle filters, interprets, and transforms remembered experience through the dual voices of Teuflesdröckh and the British editor, so White's
life is transmuted through the voice of Shapcott commenting on his friend Rutherford's history. I have already remarked that Mark Rutherford is an extension, an added dimension of, Hale White rather than a completely individualized character in a fiction. He is, if anything, White's remembered youthful self. Neither is Shapcott a totally separate persona. I have spoken before of White's "Shapcott moods"; Shapcott is a part of his creator's personality and consciousness. Together, the two characters come close to representing the "argument with himself" that White sustained in the 1880s.

Like Carlyle's editor, Shapcott is a conservative, sensible, down-to-earth, stable voice. He tends to give advice that White knew was best but was driven to ignore. He is the bridge over the chaos of Rutherford's despair, and helps to attach him to the ordinary world. We might even say that Shapcott "tailors" Rutherford's anguish in a way similar to the editor's tailoring of Teuflesdröckh's ideas. This tailoring—interpreting, counterpointing, extending—is also, of course, a means both of anticipating criticism and of creating sympathy for the protagonist. We tend to be "for" the suffering Rutherford over the cautious editor who comments upon him. Rutherford is an exile from the world in which Shapcott clearly moves with ease.

Shapcott's function in the Autobiography is certainly simpler and less active than that of Carlyle's editor; his deliberations afford a more straightforward "frame" to Rutherford's history. His function is often quite practical: he introduces the manuscript, takes credit for discovering, editing, and publishing it, and hints, at the end of the Autobiography, that more manuscripts might be found (thus paving the way for the Deliverance a few years later). At the end of the first volume he surfaces to tell readers of Mary Mardon's death and Rutherford's "crisis," and at the end of the second he reports Rutherford's own death. Shapcott's commentary suggests generally that White is detached from and in control of his experience of suffering.
Some recent commentators are uncomfortable with Shapcott's editorial function. Peter Allen, for example, accuses White of displaying his own confusion in "the unresolved tension" between Rutherford and Shapcott, and appears irritated that White had not found tidy solutions to the questions his autobiographical novel raises: "the reader is thus caught between the dramatic representation of a necessarily unhappy life and the supposed editor's belief that we must learn to find joy in the commonplace. One is likely to emerge from the work in a somewhat perplexed frame of mind." It is certainly true that Shapcott's function is to make Rutherford's experience and the negative conclusions it might encourage less clear-cut, and to make our experience of his experience more elusive and complex. I suggest, though, that the tension created by the dialogue of two (and if we consider Mardon's role, three) voices is a fruitful one. We need not choose between Shapcott and Rutherford; they allow us differing responses to stark and potentially destructive material. Shapcott's is the voice of hope mediating the voice of memory. Rutherford's autobiography documents the experience of melancholia and exile; Shapcott advises against the egoistic cultivation of alienation. White thus warns himself that in talking about angst he can sustain it, that by wedding sorrow he might deliberately deny grace and refuse the ordinary joy that is there for the taking.

Both the act of writing itself and the discovery of appropriate form transmuted the autobiographical material. The content or matter of the first volume of the autobiographical pilgrimage, *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*, which ends tentatively with Rutherford's "crisis" (reported by Shapcott), is the experience of a "victim of the century." This, then, is the static design. But the autobiographical act itself is dynamic. Remembering, arranging, choosing, discarding, patterning: even in the choice and arrangement of fictions, the writer shapes, defines, and controls the life he is "describing." White thus transforms the quality not only of the static raw material but the nature
of the consciousness engaged in the process of writing. Performing this activity, he ceases to be a victim and becomes the creator of his life. The truth of this observation is proved by the writing and issuing in 1885 of the second part of the life, Mark Rutherford’s Deliverance. At the end of the first volume, Shapcott hints that more autobiography might be located. White was not yet quite ready. After he had written the first volume, however, the second became almost inevitable. The act of writing his spiritual autobiography had engendered the creative self who imagines and orders. In the process itself he had discovered (or created) his own value. Thus the Deliverance becomes the culmination of the narrated history of the protagonist Mark Rutherford, who achieves momentarily (in the final words of his narrative) “actual joy”; and the writing of it is also the culminating triumph of the author’s life. Gamini Salgado remarks that in the Autobiography “the hero and the narrator are in effect two different personages. The ‘I’ who suffers is removed in time from the ‘I’ who creates.” This is true, but by the time the Deliverance was completed, the “I” who rejoices had become the “I” who creates. The self who writes and the self who is written about are momentarily one.

Moreover, the recollection and transformation of his own “commonplace” existence liberated White into his power as a novelist. In the novels that followed the Autobiography and Deliverance, the erstwhile lament, “mine is the tale of a commonplace life,” becomes the source of his creative genius. This intense realization of what George Eliot called “the tragedy of frequency” is White’s great gift. He recognizes the tragedy of insignificant people who see more than they can attain, whose heroism lies in the endurance of obscure and isolated lives. The setting of his novels—Cowfold, Eastthorpe, Fenmarket—is Bedford in various guises. But in these apparently dull rural towns, as within the hearts and souls of seemingly ordinary characters, White perceives and dramatizes volcanic depths of experience. Cowfold, the setting of much of the action of The Revolution in Tanner’s Lane, appears on the surface to be lacking in romance and adventure.
In reality, the narrator comments, that town contains, potentially and in fact, the sum of human history:

The garden of Eden, the murder of Cain, the deluge, the salvation of Noah, the exodus from Egypt, David and Bathsheba, with the murder of Uriah, the Assyrian invasion, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Resurrection from the Dead; to say nothing of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, the tragedy of Count Cenci, the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, the Inquisition in Spain, and Revolt of the Netherlands, all happened in Cowfold, as well as elsewhere, and were perhaps more interesting there because they could be studied in detail and the records were authentic. (RTL, 243-44)

I have argued that Wordsworth's poetry initiated for White the movement through the external appearance to the vital center of things. The *Lyrical Ballads* led him to the immediate experience of the living God in nature, who had been heretofore shrouded in the forms of dogma. In a more general way, Wordsworth first revealed for White, as for countless others, "the miraculous inherent in the commonplace, but obscured by the 'film of familiarity'" (P, 107). Having removed that "film" from his own life experience, he now became concerned to redefine the miraculous and the heroic for a public whose experience, now more than ever, was suffused with anxiety and confusion. If Mark Rutherford denied all claim to heroism, Zachariah Coleman of *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* (1887) was offered as the modern hero. He is neither a gentleman nor a wit, neither noble nor especially brave. Nevertheless, he hopes, fears, loves, and endures. The narrator remarks that when individual human worth is finally justly appraised, it will no longer be the martyr and saint who qualify as the great heroes. Rather, "a diviner heroism is that of the poor printer, who, in dingy, smoky, Rosomon Street, Clerkenwell, with forty years before him, determined to live through them... without a murmur, although there was to be no pleasure in them. A diviner heroism is this, but divinest
of all, is that of him who can in these days do what Zachariah did, and without Zachariah's faith' (RTL, 20). In his mind's eye White now sees not only Zachariah but himself: he has attempted to endure without the faith of his fathers, and has tried to understand, in recreating his life, its value.

White attempts in his subsequent fiction, then, to remove the film of familiarity from the environment, from ordinary people, and finally from the commonplace truths which enable us to live. Philosophical verities, made stale by repetition, he penetrates and revitalizes by fictional exploration. Those ideas which originally inspired religions or moral structures become real and accessible once more. Describing Samuel Johnson's *Rambler*, White remarks that it is neglected 'because its philosophy is nothing more than everybody knows.' Johnson's essays 'may be called platitudes'; but all consolation in distress is platitudinous in some sense. Johnson may have found nothing better than what is 'known to all the sons of men,' but 'he is wise enough not to discard that which is common: he had discovered that it is our duty to put life and meaning into the common; that the only salvation attainable lies therein.' Similarly, the truths to be found in Bunyan are, White states, 'not new, but saving truths are mostly commonplace. There has been enough truth in the world for centuries past to redeem every soul in it' (B, 61).

Saving truths, freedom from commonplaceness and self-despisings, however, were for White the achievements of a lifelong struggle. The act that initiated his career as a novelist was a defense against his self-tormenting personality, a way of combating 'this body of death.' I have suggested that in the writing of his spiritual autobiography, White stayed time and extended existence, broke down some of the walls imprisoning his religious life and transformed in some measure his exile. But the metamorphosis was not total, and it occurred only after the worst trials of his married and working life had been endured. To that period of his life I shall now return.