FIVE

Toward a Personal Creed

Pain and death are nothing new, and men have been driven into perplexed scepticism and insurrection by them, ever since men came into being. Always, however, have the majority, the vast majority of the race, felt instinctively that in this scepticism and insurrection they could not abide, and they have struggled more or less blindly after explanation.

—Mark Rutherford’s Deliverance

A COMMENTATOR ON WHITE’S religious thought has a natural desire to shape his ideas into a unified theological system and subdivide his intuitions into parts that reveal a logical and organized whole. We can do so only by ignoring the ambiguities and tensions in White’s own mind. He would be the first to deny that he had access to a unified system; it was the process toward truth which he valued. We have seen how his religious heritage, his temperament, and his private life all engendered the need for inner freedom, a spiritual community, and a personal, experiential faith. White’s initial rejection of orthodox Calvinism implied a release from intellectual bondage. Although he was freed from dogma and system, sterility and hypocrisy, this early freedom was largely negative, because it involved him in rejection rather than in affirmation. The experience of Wordsworth’s poetry created a new vulnerability of mind and feeling and encouraged renewed vision; but a Romantic
perspective, however valuable as an added dimension, could not sustain him. The "abstraction Nature" that deposed the Calvinist deity could not answer his religious needs any more than a Straussian Christ-myth could replace a personal Savior.

The faith that served him best came to be a reinterpretation of Puritanism. I have already mentioned White's "reaching after a meaning" and his need for a faith grounded in human experience and needs. "What is religion?" he asks. "It is the desire to find reason and order in the world" (LP, 282). Of Peter Bulkley's Gospel Covenant, he writes, "If we have patience and come close to the Gospel Covenant, we shall find that it is a genuine religion, and an attempt, as all real religions at bottom are, to make the universe and its ways by some means intelligible" (LP, 203). Elsewhere he writes that "the core of religion is the relationship of the individual to the whole" (CH, 276). All of White's writings on the Puritans manifest his sympathy with a temper of mind that asserts the importance of the individual and his or her relation to God. As we have seen, White was not able to dismiss easily the beliefs of his childhood. Years later they "revived under new forms, and... I sympathized more with the Calvinistic Independency of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than with the modern Christianity of church or chapel" (EL, 78).

In his work White continually tries to reinterpret Christianity for a modern public. In the Autobiography, Rutherford describes how he came to see "the kingdom of God through a little child," his stepdaughter. "How I see the meaning of those words now!" he exclaims, "and so it is that a text will be with us for half a lifetime, recognised as great and good, but not penetrated till the experience comes round to us in which it was born" (A, 269-70). In his Bible stories, retold from a different point of view, in his journals, essays, and in the stories and sermons that are the seed of each novel, White penetrates great religious ideas and brings them dramatically, experientially,
to life. Especially from 1880 on, in the fruitful period following his 1879 promotion, his journals testify to his daily effort to "connect," as he calls it, to enter the minds and feel with the hearts of those in whom the original ideas were born. In the "Black Notebook" (parts published posthumously in Last Pages From a Journal), White, quoting freely in French, German, Latin and Greek, recorded along with his comments quotations from his readings in Plato, Aristotle, Luther, Calvin, Bacon, Milton, Bunyan, George Fox, Spinoza, Wesley, and Kant, in addition to the Greek dramatists, eighteenth-century novelists, the Talmud, the Romantic poets, and other sources.¹

In his reinterpretation White is not only true to a Puritan tradition, but becomes a forerunner of modern theological trends. In The Analogy of Experience (1973), John E. Smith writes that in recent religious thought there has been "an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with abstractions, with ideas and doctrines commended for their antiquity and their faithfulness to the past rather than for their illumination of present and future experience." Smith argues that the modern religious thinker must now do again what was done for Christianity by Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, and Jonathan Edwards; that is, "to connect the meaning of theological ideas with human experience and to show their bearing on the life of each individual."² What we require, he adds, is creative reinterpretation of the content of the Christian faith in the light of "new knowledge and fresh experience."³ White undertook this task not through systematic theology but within his fiction. He recognized that ordinary people are not concerned with "the fallacies of Arianism, the personality of the Holy Ghost, or the doctrine of the Eucharist." Preachers, Rutherford points out, "do not know where the fatal spot lies on lung or heart or nerve which robs us of life." He observes that the members of the Drury Lane room come not for doctrinal explication but because the "fatal spot" is destroying individual identity and value. They
All "wanted something distinctly" (A, 226). They wanted direction, meaning, and reconciliation.

"Drury Lane Theology," a central chapter in Deliverance, contains the essence of the "new forms," the religious thought which is expanded, dramatized, and reshaped in White's other work. In this chapter he discusses the need for a personal and individually earned faith, and suggests that the center of that faith must be "the religion of the Reconciliation, the reconciliation of man with God" (A, 228). Like other Victorians, White also maintains the necessary coexistence of faith and doubt. He suggests that a healthy agnosticism may be positive, for in it there "is an element of hope." The human mind is not oppressed by pure doubt. Rather, "it is dogmatism under the cloak of doubt which pulls us down." Nature, the "beyond and the beyond" of infinity, is a corrective, in that the contemplation of it can expand the mind and relieve the oppression of introspection. This sense of the infinite ought to be encouraged, for such contemplation is a "constant, visible warning not to make our minds the measure of the universe" (A, 230). Therefore the center of our concern must be shifted "from self to what is outside self, and yet is truly self, and the sole truth of self" (A, 231). This, in brief, is Drury Lane theology. In this chapter, I shall look more closely at three main ideas of White's creed: his understanding of a personal and positive faith, his belief in the central importance of the relationship of God and the individual, and his conception of sin.

A personally earned faith was paramount for White. The narrator of the Autobiography clarifies the quality and complexity of the process by which it is gained:

I cannot too earnestly insist upon the need of our holding, each man for himself, by some faith which shall anchor him. It must not be taken up by chance. We must fight for it, for only so will it become our faith. The halt in indifference or in hostility is easy
enough and seductive enough. The half-hearted thinks that when he has attained that stage he has completed the term of human wisdom. I say go on: do not stay there; do not take it for granted that there is nothing beyond; incessantly attempt an advance, and at last a light, dim it may be, will arise. It will not be a completed system, perfect in all points, an answer to all our questions, but at least it will give ground for hope. (A, 229)

White's own faith is not a "completed system," but his work contains various exhortations and guides to developing a personal faith. The first principle is always that a personal faith must be applicable to the facts of experience; that is, the relation between belief and action must be explicit. Faith must help the individual and be a genuine source of comfort and guidance in adversity. While we cannot, he writes, expect a remedy which is "uniformly and progressively efficacious," we may hope that "gradually, very gradually, it will assist us to a real victory" (CH, 190). A genuine faith, then, must help the seeker toward self-transcendence. Second, while faith must, for White, arise out of and address itself to the facts of experience, he recognizes that the "facts" are not only tragic. Life is also continually pervaded by joyful, intuitive, and imaginative understanding. A genuine faith must therefore also include the witness of the heart, the "inner light" which if intangible is nonetheless profoundly real. Third, although personal faith must be forged anew, not once but continually, White argues that a principle should not be abandoned merely because it does not apply uniformly to all situations: we are not in a position to insist on a tidy set of infallible rules for life. The practical meaning of all these concepts, will, I hope, become clear as we proceed.

White felt that the need to find a personal faith was particularly urgent in his own time. Especially in the 1880s and 1890s, he saw the direction religion and art were taking as a manifestation of decadence. His essay "Marcus Antoninus"
(1880), which reveals more about White's own attitudes than about those of the philosopher, makes this point forcefully. White perceives in Antoninus a kindred spirit. Antoninus, he writes:

was in the position in which many of us now are. He had no traditionary faith to which he could resort for oracular and unquestionable replies to all his doubts. The old Roman worship had decayed, and whatever help was necessary he had to obtain for himself. It is probable that all men who think at all about these things are compelled to work out their own salvation, even if born into the straitest sect from which they may never stray. . . . Nevertheless, it ever must be true that, when popular religions have all gone to dust, or when, as in our day, they are halfway towards it—the most disgusting stage of all putrefaction—our difficulties are increased and the solitude is deepened.4

The solitude is deepened. We are again on familiar ground. From White's point of view, Antoninus heroically fashioned for himself a creed which confronted the facts and did not deceive with false expectations. The Stoic feels that "no man will lose any other life than that which he now possesses." White is consoled by Antoninus's view that death is good, "seasonable and profitable and congruent with the universal," a view he held in spite of being "tormented with a desire to be remembered." Antoninus thinks "we have been invited to a feast; we have eaten and drunken; let us arise with thanks to the gods and depart." Furthermore, Antoninus, like Reuben Shapcott, discouraged philosophical speculation that could have no practical results: "He disbelieves . . . in any useless speculation why things are constituted as they are constituted." White admired the courage and endurance characteristic of Stoicism, but of even greater importance to him was its very bleakness: "There was no possibility that . . . [Antoninus] should wake up one morning and find that some sceptic or scoffer had undermined his faith,
had proved his miracles to be false, his saviour an imposter, his scriptures to be forgeries of a later date, and his heaven a delusion." This bitter summary of nineteenth-century historical criticism and its consequences clearly has a personal application: it echoes back to Bunyan Meeting and New College. Stoic philosophy drew White because in it he found truths which, however meager, could not be undermined. With its stark, unhopeful view of life, Stoic philosophy cannot be further diminished; the believer would not be first deceived and then disillusioned. "Compared with the magnificent promises of the religions, it may be thought that his results were meagre. . . . Whatever they were, they were irreversible, as solid as any proposition in Euclid."5

But while Stoicism had great appeal, it did not conclude White's quest for a personal faith. It was his lot to hunger for those very "magnificent promises" that Stoic philosophy eschews. White's study of Antoninus reveals his continuing conflict between a desire to set to rest the anxieties produced by attention to ultimate questions and an equally strong need to pursue them. The Stoic attitude of endurance and resignation expresses that side of White that heartily desired not to look "around the corner" (A, viii); Antoninus's position constituted yet one more of his defensive strategies against despair.

White required a religion that would not disappoint or dissolve upon inquiry and that was applicable to the needs of limited human nature. His evaluation of Stoicism can be judged more precisely in the context of his other comments on a personal faith. The Reverend Mr. Bradshaw, the powerful Puritan minister of *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*, also encourages his congregation to develop an authentic and individual creed. If a religion helps one to nothing but knowledge of heaven and a future life, he exclaims, it is useless. White's own voice and attitude are apparent in Bradshaw's sermon: "the sign of a true religion—true for you, is this—Does it assist you to bear
your own private difficulties? . . . not the difficulties of the schools and theology, but those of the parlour and counting-house; ay, difficulties most difficult, those with persons nearest to you?" (RTL, 324). Bradshaw adds, in effect, another element to the "meagre" counsels of Stoicism: he suggests in his sermon that one can form an individual faith within the context of discipleship to Christ. Bradshaw preaches the Bible not only because it contains the revealed Word, but because the truths to be found in it are both universal and particular. The wisdom of "millions of apostles, of heroes, of martyrs, of poor field labourers, of solitary widows, of orphans, of the destitute, of men driven to their last extremity" (RTL, 325) must be felt, sifted, adapted to individual needs.

This is a central point in White's thought: although personal experience must be the basis of a personal creed, experience alone is insufficient. The spiritual community of those who have felt as he has felt both authenticates his own experience and paradoxically particularizes and concretizes it. Like his creator, Zachariah Coleman never completely loses his old Calvinist beliefs; they are, instead, through his unique experience of the world, modified and transformed. In maturity, Zachariah is able to embrace what he calls both the "yes and no." Once poles apart and mutually exclusive, the old beliefs and his recent experiences now sustain and interpret each other in a dynamic synthesis: "Blanketeer marches; his first wife; the workhouse; imprisonment; his second wife; the little Pauline, had each come to him with its own special message" (RTL, 327–28). Through the interpretation of his individual experience in the light of his inherited faith, Zachariah discovers his own religion. He becomes in the exploration what White terms "a character," as the process of forging his own creed both creates and sustains his identity as an individual.

Thus the process of creating a personal faith is of crucial importance. From his own experience, White knew that "we are
always forcing our own gods on other people, never reflecting that God, to be God and not an idol, must be sought and found by the worshipper” (L, 251). Here we encounter another paradox in his thinking. He had rejected the Calvinist doctrine that the elect cannot fall from grace, and his own life taught him that the individual requires continual forgiveness, and that a living faith must be constantly renewed and reshaped. Yet he also maintained that beliefs which have been fought for and earned should not be jettisoned simply because they sometimes prove inapplicable. “It is our duty,” he writes, “to struggle to maintain convictions against decay. They often die, not by reason of counter convictions . . . but by mere inactivity” (LP, 269). This idea is reiterated with personal emphasis in More Pages From a Journal: “I want no more beliefs. What I want is active strength in those I have. I know there is no ghost round the corner, but I dare not go” (MP, 242).

We should not interpret White’s purposefulness, therefore, as a linear movement toward a final goal, but as an earnest struggle to preserve what he had come to believe was true, while also remaining open to new truths. As he himself perceived, his attitude here reflects the fragmentation of the age as well as his own particular psychic defenses. One final statement may clarify his perspective: “Faith, the belief which saves, is not to be preserved without a struggle. It is not a conclusion which comes automatically from evidence presented. A hundred times a day suggestions are made within us to abandon this or that result we have achieved with much effort, and we are not then to balance but to hold fast with claws” (LP, 302).

The intellectual temptations of the nineteenth century created a need to cling to “what we have once heard, really heard in our best moments.” Reading and reflection daily confronted him with “fifty fine thoughts,” each of which had the potential to challenge or disorient him (P, 195). The intellectual conflict I discussed in an earlier chapter is most apparent when he
confronts religious questions. "During the major portion of my life I am the victim of antagonisms, and each opposing force seems able to plead equal justification," he writes in the essay "Principles" (A, 304). Because his ability to see merit in each of two contradictory perspectives often resulted in psychological paralysis, "holding fast with claws" became yet another guard against mental and emotional chaos.

If principles were difficult to apply, White nonetheless felt that "perpetual undying faith in principles is of the utmost importance. I sometimes think it is the very Alpha and Omega of life. Belief in principles is the only intelligible interpretation I have ever been able to attach to the word faith" (A, 306). Similarly, in his penultimate novel, Catharine Furze, Cardew preaches that "we must, in the conduct of life, shape our behaviour by some one standard, or the result is chaos" (CF, 111). These remarks expand the idea of "holding fast with claws." In the process of struggle the authority of a principle may reveal itself. It becomes clear that for White willed endurance itself is an act of faith.

White also felt that the process of forging a personal faith should be positive, that the intellect should not be applied merely to destruction. He makes this belief clear in the Autobiography, when, after leaving the ministry, Rutherford ponders his future course. Now that he is without a belief in Christian revelation, the notion of preaching morality alone is repugnant. Another activity might be the proclamation of "a message of negations, emancipating a number of persons from the dogma of the Trinity or future punishment, and spending my strength in merely demonstrating the nonsense of orthodoxy." But his "soul sickened at the very thought of it" (A, 86). White's desire to respond to the query, "wherein would men be helped, and wherein should I be helped?" requires affirmation rather than mere iconoclasm. Later in the novel, Rutherford and M'Kay attend a "freethinking hall" to hear a debate between a Christian
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minister and an atheist opponent. The narrator describes the atheist's attack as ironic, clever, and destructive. Listening to the skeptic's speech reinforces Rutherford's feeling that the demolition of a faith for no positive end is futile and frivolous: "That they should spend their time in picking the Bible to pieces when there was so much positive work for them to do, seemed to me as melancholy as if they had spent themselves upon theology. To waste a Sunday morning in ridiculing such stories as that of Jonah was surely as imbecile as to waste it in proving their verbal veracity" (A, 160).

"Positive work" is continually contrasted with "waste" in White's religious thought. Because of his conviction of the necessity of a positive creed, he frequently questioned the ultimate value of the critical-historical trend of the nineteenth century. While perceiving the need for critical investigation in religious matters, he also suspected the motives of some critics and worried about the effects of criticism on those who did not move beyond it to seek a positive truth. Thus, in the Autobiography, he writes that: "all great religions should be treated with respect, and in a certain sense preserved. It is nothing less than a wicked waste of accumulated human strivings to sneer them out of existence. They will be found, every one of them, to have incarnated certain vital doctrines which it has cost centuries of toil and devotion properly to appreciate" (A, 228-29). In his final journal he observes that "the danger of criticism, of Biblical criticism for example, is that it tends to divert us from that which is positive, indisputable, life-giving" (LP, 317).

White's abhorrence of the merely critical attitude of mind, which undermines belief and gives no help, extends to his literary response. As well as deising some biblical criticism because it is merely negative, and substitute religions because they are sentimental or facile, he reproaches many modern writers' glorification of melancholy for a similar combination of reasons.
Mark Rutherford writes:

So many books I find are written which aim merely at new presentation of the hopeless. The contradictions of fate, the darkness of death, the fleeting of man over this brief stage of existence, whence we know not, and whither we know not, are favourite subjects with writers who seem to think that they are profound, because they can propose questions which cannot be answered. There is really more strength of mind required for resolving the commonest difficulty than is necessary for the production of poems on these topics. The characteristic of so much that is said and written now is melancholy; and it is melancholy, not because of any deeper acquaintance with the secrets of man than that which was possessed by our forefathers, but because it is easy to be melancholy, and the time lacks strength. (A, 256).

White's reading confirmed his fear that the literature of the decade "did no good." Like Matthew Arnold and George Eliot, he insisted on the relationship of literature to life. Echoing Arnold, he argued that "poetry, if it is to be good for anything, must help us to live. It is to this we come at last in our criticism, and if it does not help us to live it may as well disappear, no matter what its fine qualities may be" (P, 108). No more than Arnold does White mean to suggest by such statements a narrow, moralistic didacticism. His own love of Byron, I think, helps to clarify his meaning. By contact with the "mass of white hot coal" (L, 109) that defines for him the essence of Byron's poetry, he is healed, uplifted, made joyful. In the combined beauty and energy of Byron's verse, Zachariah Coleman discovers "courage—root of all virtue—that dares and evermore dares in the very last extremity, the love of the illimitable, of freedom" (RTL, 25).

These few examples suggest the relationship between White's response to imaginative literature and his response to
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In literature and in life, "why," he asks, "should we neglect the mass of truth which tends to reconciliation with existence for the truth which breeds despair?" (LP, 281). In his essay on Peter Bulkley, White emphasizes the point that the "reason and order," the intelligibility of the universe that constitutes religion, is to be found in relationship; "the reconciliation provided by the Gospel Covenant may not be ours, but the important point is that it assumes that a reconciliation should and could be obtained" (LP, 203–04). In his short story "Michael Trevanion," White describes the self-denial that is a potent feature of Trevanion's Calvinism. Characteristically, White remarks that in his own time unselfishness is of less importance than the ability to analyze poetry. The narrator looks forward to a time when "we shall . . . spend ourselves not in criticism of the record of the saints who sat by the sepulchre, but we shall love as they loved" (MS, 181). In this statement we approach the center of White's religious thought: a faith that is informed by love is impossible to the critical, alienated outsider. His own fight for religious integrity led him through critical rejection of Puritanism toward "reaching after a meaning." He struggled to move beyond iconoclasm to reinterpretation and reconciliation—reconciliation with God, with his fellow man, with himself, and with his inherited faith. "We need to be taught to admire, to surrender ourselves to admiration," White declares in an essay on George Eliot (LP, 134). Similarly, in More Pages From a Journal, he writes that "it is by admiration and not by criticism that we live, and the main purpose of criticism should be to point out something to admire, which we should not have noticed" (MP, 257).

The second major area of White's religious thought I shall consider is his understanding of the relationship between the individual and God. In a conversation with Dorothy, White said, "but don't let any one think that, because I use the word so
rarely, I don’t believe in God. I do. It is the only thing in which I do believe'’ (GD, 193). This is a strong statement, but precisely what White meant by it is problematic. His article ‘‘Ixion’’ (1880), written, like ‘‘Marcus Antoninus,’’ for The Secular Review, seems at first glance to be a secular attack on the traditional conception of God. While the essay primarily informs us of what White does not believe, it also indirectly suggests how he understands God. White argues that the usual terminology is either contradictory or meaningless. He dissects the ‘‘common formula,’’ which views God as ‘‘personal, perfect, omnipotent, omniscient, all-loving, and absolutely just.’’ He then proceeds to analyze and reject each of these terms. Taking the first attribute, he states, ‘‘Personality means consciousness of separate self-hood. . . . It means definition, limitation.’’ The idea of ‘‘perfection’’ is similarly empty; since the intellect is incapable of grasping it as an idea, the concept recedes into nothingness. Omnipotence White also regards as self-contradictory, ‘‘unless it be taken merely to mean a power beyond our conception.’’ Other attributes must limit divine omnipotence, for in fact ‘‘God does not and cannot do everything which is conceivable to an abstractly omnipotent being.’’

This analysis is not an ironic example of White’s own engagement in negative criticism, for the dissection is not an end in itself. His concern is that the traditional vocabulary is sufficiently abstract to kill a living God and replace Him with an idol composed of meaningless terms. White rejects abstract definition divorced from experiential meaning, perceiving that the attempt to glorify God by abstract superlatives can in fact limit and reduce His being. ‘‘It is remarkable,’’ he notes, ‘‘that Moses should have been aware of this constant tendency in man to imprison God in form, and should have striven against it as earnestly as if it were a crime.’’

Even in his desire for a vital relationship with God, White remained alert to the self-centeredness latent in such a wish. His
suspicion of claims to personal knowledge of God (of the "He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am his own" variety) perhaps arose from his youthful memory of Calvinism. In Bunyan Meeting, it seemed that God was appropriated by the elect, who testified to intimate relationship with Him. At the conclusion of the "Ixion" article, White characteristically suggests that the individual should concentrate upon perceiving himself as part of the "universal life." Then, he hopes, "our God will no longer be a God who would reverse the rules of this great universe to gratify the whinings of foolish children, but will be the vitality and purpose of the whole." Yet White is aware of a God who is alive and immanent in the individual heart and in the external world. An isolated comment in his journals might stand as a gloss upon the article as a whole: "Intense feeling gives intellectual precision. . . . But the first effect of intense feeling is often to break up false precision. The ideas of God, life, personality, right and wrong, are examples." (MP, 236). "Ixion" is just such an attempt to break up the false precision of orthodox conceptions of God.

Scattered remarks elsewhere in White's work place the Ixion article in a larger perspective. In his preface to Spinoza's Ethic (1883), White suggests that in addition to providing the believer with moral counsel, a genuine religion should encourage men to move emotionally beyond "the limits of the world in which . . . [they] live." Religion should be "the perpetual affirmation against the perpetual negation which lies in the routine and vulgarity of existence." He goes on in this preface to explain that the most important achievement of Christianity is that it "tells the humblest of a supreme God to whom we are each one of us personally related." Thus White struggles for some kind of description of a relationship which is real for him but which continues to elude expression. The very actuality of the divine-human relationship undermines attempts at definition. "The unapproachable ideal possesses no regulative value for
us. God, as an ideal, has no effect on the character’" (LP, 272; my emphasis). Precisely. This statement again qualifies the apparent iconoclasm of ‘’Ixion.’’ An ‘’unapproachable’’ ideal allows no relationship and remains, though abstractly definable, personally irrelevant. Another notebook entry clarifies White’s struggle and the reason for his apparent confusion: ‘’It is difficult to believe in God, not because He is so far off, but because He is so near’’ (LP, 281). Relationship with the divine breaks down the barriers of selfhood, so that the word belief itself becomes superfluous.

White’s concern to understand and his attempt to express the relationship of God to the individual, though, are best illuminated in his discussion of the Book of Job. I suggested earlier that White had a personal stake in that work. He can deeply empathize with the man who cries, ‘’For I fear a fear; it meets me; and what I shudder at comes to me’’ (Job 3:25). His comments on this statement reveal one reason for his fascination with the Old Testament protagonist: ‘’The object of the dread which haunts us does not generally become real to us, but to Job the horror of all his worst dreams had become actual.’’ This was White’s greatest fear. His interpretation of Job’s battle with God therefore clarifies and extends his apprehension of his own relationship to God.

White explains that the example of Job demonstrates to the reader that one can express doubt without blasphemying, for Job batters heaven for a response, any kind of response, from God: ‘’Nothing can be more daring than his interrogations. There is no impiety whatever in them, nor are they recognised as impious in the final chapters of the book’’ (A, 282–83). Job is afflicted with poverty, illness, and sorrow; if he could elicit some form of explanation for his trials (White’s frequent wish), he could endure in patience. But there is no explanation, and significantly White perceives that the departure of the divine Presence from Job’s consciousness and his total isolation as a consequence of
a now-broken relationship with God are the chief sources of his anguish: “the real agony is the silence, the ignorance of the why and the wherefore, the sphinx-like imperturbability which meets his prayers” (A, 276). As White did on many occasions, Job submits and waits. The voice from the whirlwind which finally speaks to him, White argues, “is in no sense whatever [an appeal] to the bare omnipotence of God” (A, 297). White notes further that Job is never told of the drama in heaven between God and Satan. But while he is not given an explanation of the divine actions, he is given a response. He is told by God to “open the eyes and look abroad over the universe” (A, 298). White concludes that

God reminds us of His wisdom, of the mystery of things, and that man is not the measure of His creation. The world is immense, constructed on no plan or theory which the intellect of man can grasp. It is transcendent everywhere. This is the burden of every verse, and is the secret, if there be one, of the poem. Sufficient or insufficient, there is nothing more. Job is to hold fast to the law within; that is his candle which is to light his path: but God is infinite. Job, if he is not satisfied, submits. . . . All his thinkings seemed like hearsay. This then was the real God. “Now mine eye seeth Thee.” (A, 299).

White does not suggest in this interpretation mindless resignation in the face of the incomprehensible. Rather, the meaning of the story lies for him in Job’s experience of God, in his confrontation with God’s living presence. It is only because the relationship with God which had been broken is renewed that Job can submit to “things too wonderful for” him. Job is told to open his eyes, to apprehend God’s reality in the world, even “where no man is.” What has occurred in him is direct enlightenment, which may have nothing to do with rational explanation. Job has lived by tradition and orthodoxy; he has known God only by “hearsay.” At the end of the book, this
traditional understanding has been replaced by direct experiential knowledge of God. "Now mine eye seeth thee." White suggests that of greater moment than self-centered concern for God's personal interest is genuine recognition of the mystery of God, which is "transcendent everywhere." Out of this recognition arises genuine relationship. Hence, in White's view, Job does not blindly or resentfully submit; he is reconciled.\textsuperscript{12}

Job, White argues, is now to "hold fast to the moral law within." White reiterates this point throughout his work. In his biography of Bunyan, he suggests that Emmanuel Kant had "regained that reverence which the Puritan felt for something supernatural" (B, 244). White refers here to the well-known statement from \textit{The Critique of Practical Reason}: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: \textit{the starry heavens above and the moral law within.}"\textsuperscript{13} As we shall discover in the next chapter, White's own reverence for "the starry heavens above" was immense. What concerns us here, however, is his understanding of the "moral law within," which he suggests is Job's human reference point for conduct and the source of his relationship to God. In this matter, too, White returns to Puritanism, reinterpreting the experience of the "inner light" for a secular public.

Mark Rutherford, as the narrator of \textit{Catharine Furze}, discusses this experience: "We have discarded Providence as our forefathers believed in it; but nevertheless there is a providence without the big P, if we choose so to spell it, and yet surely deserving it as much as the Providence of theology, a non-theological Providence which watches over us and leads us. It appears as instinct prompting us to do this and not to do that, to decide this way or that way when we have no consciously rational ground for decision, to cleave to this person and shun the other, almost before knowing anything of either"
One might argue that White's pervasive interest in the “inner light” is merely the inarticulate residue of a Nonconformist conscience tainted by Romanticism. But his treatment of the “instinct” that he sees operating strongly in human beings is, rather, another attempt to clarify and evaluate, as he does in “Ixion” and “Notes on the Book of Job,” that elusive sense of divine relationship that continually escapes definition. In his journals he refers to this sense of divine immanence repeatedly: “A mere dream, a vague hope may be more potent than certainty in a lesser matter. The faintest vision of God is more determinative of life than a gross earthly certainty” (MP, 220). “The thoughts by which we live may lie too deep for expression; perhaps even for distinct consciousness. The Hope which is our support is based on something below anything which can be brought to visibility” (LP, 256). “None of the formal arguments for the existence of God really convince. The proof lies in hints and dreams which are not expressible by human language” (LP, 274). Such comments reveal White's reaching after a meaning in the matter of the reality of God and the reality of divine relationship. The instinct may be “too deep for expression,” but it is nevertheless sufficiently potent to be “determinative” of action.

The experience of the inner light that culminates in human response to recognized divine authority—to a “non-theological Providence” acting as “the moral law within”—is variously dramatized in White's fiction. Some characters, the mother of Esther for instance, must attempt to subdue violent emotion and wait patiently for the divine voice. Hearing that her daughter is desperately unhappy in her new marriage, Esther's mother wrestles with the possibilities of action open to her. She writes to her child: “I must still wait for the light which I trust will be given me. It is wonderful how sometimes it strikes down on me suddenly and sometimes grows by degrees like the day over Ingleby Fen” (MP, 51). As the “light” grows more powerful, she
is able to act. Her daughter must leave her husband and come home: “I could not make up my mind last night, but this morning the light, the direction, as my mother used to say, was like a star” (MP, 55). The language suggests a conscious use of White’s religious heritage. For the Puritan, direction followed prayer and openness to the Word.

Others among White’s characters undergo similar struggles before they instinctively perceive how to act. Miss Eyre, the heroine of “Conscience,” falls in love with her pupil’s fiancé and recognizes that he returns her affection. After days and nights of anxiety and conflict, at the crucial moment she refuses him: “no sooner had she left him than she was confounded, and wondered who or what it was which gave that answer. She wavered, and thought of going back, but she did not.” The same sense that an unknown power operates within the heart without the conscious sanction of the mind occurs in Catharine Furze. At the height of her passion for Cardew, in the episode by the river discussed in the preceding chapter, an image of his suffering wife arises in Catharine’s consciousness. She leaves this intense scene, later wondering what had prompted her sudden and intuitive action. Catharine wanders in the garden, “and again cursed herself that she had dismissed him. Who had dismissed him? Not she. How had it been done? She could not tell” (CF, 180). At this moment she does not know if she has acted rightly; but she comes to believe that her renunciation has led to salvation for both herself and Cardew.

Madge Hopgood’s internal struggle is more carefully described, for her inner light directs her toward what appears to be selfishness. White returns to the problem several times. Madge decides “instinctively” that she cannot marry the father of her child. She is encouraged to change her mind by the man himself, who claims he still loves her; by the woman who has come to stand in the place of a mother to her; and finally by her sister Clara, whose spiritual authority Madge has all her life
recognized and valued. She wavers but then stands firm: "There was nothing to support her but something veiled, which would not altogether disclose or explain itself. Nevertheless, in a few minutes, her enemies had vanished, like a mist before a sudden wind, and she was once more victorious. Precious and rare are those divine souls, to whom that which is aërial is substantial, the only true substance; those for whom a pale vision possesses an authority they are forced unconditionally to obey" (CH, 197). In this episode, White deliberately echoes the three temptations of Christ. Madge recognizes the validity of the reasons the tempters (Frank, Mrs. Caffyn, Clara) offer her but still obeys the "something veiled" that has greater authority.

White nevertheless perceives that obedience to the divine voice is possible only if the individual recognizes it as divine. I have already discussed the internal debate that often resulted for White in emotional and psychological paralysis. In the Autobiography, Miss Arbour tells Mark Rutherford how to escape this impasse: not by further ratiocination, but by learning to hear and trust the quiet voice that gives direction. She uses her own life as an example: she had made a great mistake, she tells Rutherford, by ignoring her "first and sovereign impulse" not to marry. But how is one to "distinguish heavenly instigation from hellish temptation?" Miss Arbour claims that her mistake was to look "for something more authoritative"; now late in life she has finally learned that "the voice of God . . . hardly ever comes in thunder. . . . I have to listen with perfect stillness to make it out" (A, 62). White suggests that although there is "no law by which infallibly to recognise the messenger from God," when the moment of crisis actually arrives, by listening quietly, by paying attention before rational calculation takes over, "it is perfectly easy for us to recognise him."

Thus White affirms the reality of the "moral law within" while perfectly comprehending the difficulty of hearing and then obeying it. Once it is recognized, the individual must "hold fast
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with claws” to what has been intuitively understood. Miss Arbour reminds Rutherford of Psalm 119, to which White also alludes in his discussion of Job. The moral law within is Job’s “candle which is to light his path.” Miss Arbour elaborates: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet.” We have no light promised us to show us our road a hundred miles away, but we have a light for the next footstep, and if we take that, we shall have a light for the one which is to follow” (A, 69). White, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, looks for direction in a personal faith; he does not expect a unified and completed system or a ground plan of the universe. His reinterpretation of the Puritan “inner light” does not trivialize the concept but rather gives it life in ordinary human terms.

The “moral law within” filled Kant with “admiration and awe.” White takes this statement and expands its meaning in his own reinterpretation of faith, but nevertheless qualifies his debt. Significantly, he adds, “Bunyan goes beyond Kant and lays an additional and even deeper foundation stone for righteousness” (B, 244). Bunyan, White declares, believed that man departs from iniquity because faith apprehends the love of God in Christ, and love persuades the believer to turn away from sin. Puritanism insists upon “the difference between right and wrong and on the doctrine of responsibility” (B, 245). The two are inseparable. Because there is a relationship between human beings and God, there must be responsibility. “Puritanism,” White argues, “insisted on our responsibility to God. When we lie, we break, not a human convention, but a divine ordinance imposed on us. Puritanism becomes a religion more particularly in this idea of responsibility” (B, 241). White’s Puritan ancestors strongly emphasized the duality of human nature. A real religion for White, as we have seen, must be personal, affirmative, and centered in a genuine relationship with God. Finally, it must confront human duality, must assume and address the fallen nature of man.
If one reads White superficially, it is possible to conclude that he rejects Puritan doctrine in his lack of emphasis on sin. Drury Lane theology, for instance, refers to "sins" rather than "sin"—errors rather than radical depravity. But there are clear reasons for White's avoidance of the word *sin*. First, in his own early experience of Calvinism, sin as an abstract notion and not a felt reality led to hypocrisy. Second, White feared that undue emphasis upon human depravity might be psychologically destructive. If one is hopelessly sinful, why struggle to endure? Because White seeks an affirmative and vital faith, he is wary of propounding ideas that might only produce despair.

Because White does not usually write specifically of "sin," at first glance he might seem to underestimate its power. But this is not the case. The whole burden of his fiction suggests his experiential knowledge of the virulence and pervasiveness of sin. The "fatal spot . . . which robs us of life" is, in his own experience, self-absorption in its myriad forms. White presupposes human brokenness and limitedness. His wife's suffering, his own melancholia, his awareness of social evil all reinforced the Puritan emphasis upon the distinction between good and evil. White could not escape the profound and farreaching influence of his religious heritage. R. H. Hutton's remark about Carlyle, that his "whole early teaching really rested on the principle of the immutable hostility of good and evil,"\(^{16}\) might be applied with equal force to White. "Among other evils which . . . [Puritanism] has inflicted," John Morley exclaimed, is "this inability to conceive of conduct except as either right or wrong, and . . . teaching . . . as either true or false."\(^{17}\) Part of the religion that White could not "cast away like an old garment" was precisely this instinctive understanding of the "immutable hostility" of good and evil. As part of the texture of White's consciousness, this attitude enters into his judgment of, say, Arnold, whose analysis of Puritanism in *St. Paul and Protestantism* could provoke only contempt. "The theological
form of Puritanism . . . was not due, as Mr. Arnold supposes, to mere speculation. Heaven, hell and the Atonement were the results of the conception that there is a generic, eternal and profoundly important distinction between right and wrong" (B, 239). Thus White firmly states his allegiance to a temper of mind grown obsolete. He believed that "the words right and wrong are not felt now as they were felt by Paul. They shade off one into the other. Nevertheless, if mankind is not to be lost, the ancient antagonism must be maintained" (A, 234-35).

But however strong the impact of his religious heritage, White was also a nineteenth-century man, an early associate of George Eliot and erstwhile vender of heretical books, inevitably influenced by the positivist and progressivist theories of human nature current in his time. The general psychological conflict engendered by these two opposed tendencies also had particular ramifications. The facts of life forced him to accept the omnipresence of evil, yet while accepting the moral validity of the "ancient antagonism" he was intellectually unable to believe in the actuality of a diabolic opponent engaged in eternal warfare with the good. Satan's continuing presence in human affairs may have been a vital belief for his ancestors, but here, as a nineteenth-century man, White cannot follow them. He therefore wrestles both for an explanation of evil in the world and for a reasonable definition of it that will allow him to oppose it aggressively.

I have suggested that the clarity of Puritan thought on good and evil strongly attracted White: "Many mistakes may be pardoned in Puritanism in view of the earnestness with which it insists on the distinction between right and wrong. This is vital. In modern religion the path is flowery" (EL, 78). Similarly, though he recognized that "the shallowest of mortals is able now to laugh at the notion of a personal devil," he respects the feeling that gave birth to the idea: "No doubt there is no such thing existent; but the horror at evil which could find no other expression than in the creation of a devil is no subject for
laughter’” (A, 235). Thus we find White applauding Puritanism for its emphasis on good and evil and recognizing the quality of mind that requires the concept of an evil force, but at the same time believing that “no doubt there is no such thing existent.” The lack of a specific antagonist naturally makes the struggle against evil more complex. White often compares the quality of spiritual life in the nineteenth century with that of the sixteenth and seventeenth. The difference is not merely a reflection of general religious decadence: “The public evils which weigh upon us most heavily are so formless, so universally-penetrating that it seems hopeless to combat them. Luther had a definite foe. He believed that if he could overthrow the Papacy the world would be regenerated. Happy prophet! What can we do against omnipresent dishonesty, moral scepticism, and modern political methods?” (LP, 306). This is not, I think, the usual Victorian nostalgia for a lost golden age. The question is personal and immediate, for here as elsewhere White's difficulty is complicated by the absence of a “definite foe” to fight. In several places in this study I have discussed White’s psychological need for a particular imaginative focus when caught in mental turmoil. In this instance, when he feels overwhelmed by the amorphous random evils of his time in combination with his personal emotional “enemy,” his impulse is Manichaean. The feelings of uselessness and chaos that the pervasiveness of evil provoke impel his imagination to create the definite and particular foe it requires in order to sustain combat. “He said,” writes Dorothy, “it was so much easier to fight against evil if we looked upon it as something outside ourselves; some body too, I said” (GD, 341). Elsewhere he remarks, “never treat the devil as a reasonable being.” An extraordinary entry in the “White Notebook,” written in his last years, contains an argument for the reality of—or the need for—a diabolic presence in the world:

There is strong evidence, not only for the existence of a Devil, but a designing Devil. . . . I take up a flower. It is a miracle of
designed loveliness, designed, unless my instinct and reason are valueless. At the very instant of its unfolding a blight is ready, waiting to ruin it. Can any sane man believe that both proceed from the same author? If this be true our confusion is far more terrible than that which comes from the acknowledgment of a spirit of evil. If God, the begetter of the rose plots to destroy it we despair, but if He is good and the darkness and horror of the world can be ascribed to a mighty enemy, victory over him seems nearer possibility. At any rate we know that there is a great Power in existence altogether friendly and it is not too much perhaps to say that already on rare occasions we hear afar off, "faintly," a triumphal note.  

The passage reveals the nature of the conflict; the mental process it expresses is also familiar. In the first part, White confesses the need to imagine an Enemy that his intellect cannot sanction in order to preserve himself from "confusion" and insanity. But in the second part, he concedes his inability to understand and solve the problem, and moves toward hope, to the "rare occasions" when he, like Bunyan's Pilgrim, dimly perceives divine order and senses divine victory.

As we shall see in the following chapter, the impulse toward unity and synthesis was strong in White. Nevertheless, throughout his work he also acknowledges dualism in human beings and in the world at large. "Man is inexplicable on any hypothesis of a unity," he argues (LP, 258). Although such knowledge created anxiety, it was preferable to facile optimism. The facts of experience point to opposing tendencies in the individual and in the cosmos, and it is better that "we should be unable to find any justice in the divine procedure than that we should feign a justice which does not exist" (LP, 287). An entry in the "Black Notebook," written at least fifteen years later than the "Ixion" essay, finds White reflecting again on the pernicious effect of the doctrine of God's omnipotence: "most of our speculative difficulties arise from the conception of an
omnipotent Deity. It is because God could have done otherwise and did not that we are distressed. . . . It may be perplexing and depressing to think that God cannot do any better; that my suffering cannot be helped but at any rate it is not so depressing and perplexing as the belief that the suffering might have been prevented if He had so willed it." 20 These sentiments proceed from the same source as his defense of Stoicism. Feigning a unity and perceiving a justice that is not there require self-deception that may finally issue in the inability to distinguish between good and evil.

One way of keeping alive the hope that what he sometimes dimly perceived would eventually be clarified "face-to-face," through relationship, may be found in White's constant effort to acknowledge and glorify what he terms "the other side" of human life. In describing Drury Lane theology, Mark Rutherford admits that the group never found arguments sufficiently powerful to counter the facts of suffering and death: "But we were able to say there is some compensation, that there is another side, and this is all that man can say. No theory of the world is possible. The storm, the rain slowly rotting the harvest, children sickening in cellars are obvious; but equally obvious are an evening in June, the delight of men and women in one another, in music, and in the exercise of thought" (A, 229). 21 An earlier passage, similar in tone and content to this statement, contains an additional personal note: "Everything was full of contradiction. On the one hand was infinite misery; on the other there were exquisite adaptations producing the highest pleasure: on the one hand the mystery of life-long disease, and on the other the equal mystery of the unspeakable glory of the sunrise on a summer's morning over a quiet summer sea" (A, 84).

White's confrontation with evil and his refusal to be satisfied with false or sentimental solutions are central to his religious quest. He is able to see "another side"; he remains acutely aware of the fact of evil and yet struggles to transcend it in his own
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White's confrontation with evil and his refusal to be satisfied with false or sentimental solutions are central to his religious quest. He is able to see "another side"; he remains acutely aware of the fact of evil and yet struggles to transcend it in his own
heart. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, he also remained aware of the great mystery inherent in pain. God Himself suffered on the cross; in White's own experience suffering is often the path to salvation: deliverance sometimes arose from "between the horns of the wild oxen."

In Drury Lane, Mark Rutherford gropes toward an explanation of the ambiguity and mystery which he perceives:

In my younger days the aim of theologians was the justification of the ways of God to man. They could not succeed. They succeeded no better than ourselves in satisfying the intellect with a system. Nor does the Christian religion profess any such satisfaction. It teaches rather the great doctrine of a Remedy, of a Mediator; and therein it is profoundly true. It is unphilosophical in the sense that it offers no explanation from a single principle, and leaves the ultimate mystery as dark as before, but it is in accordance with our intuitions. Everywhere in nature we see exaction of penalties down to the uttermost farthing, but following after this we discern forgiveness, obliterating and restorative. Both tendencies exist. Nature is Rhadamanthine, and more so, for she visits the sins of the fathers upon the children; but there is in her also an infinite Pity, healing all wounds, softening all calamities, ever hastening to alleviate and repair. Christianity in strange historical fashion is an expression of nature, a projection of her into a biography and a creed. (A, 234)

Christianity offered no explanation of evil in the terms that White often hungered for, yet he saw it as true to the facts of natural experience. In his own life, White continued to hope and to attempt an expansion and redirection of his freedom. Having begun with the reinterpretation of his inherited faith, he went on to explore specific sources of personal deliverance: "the starry heavens above," the "exercise of thought," and the Mediator who teaches that the norm of human life is love.