

MARK RUTHERFORD'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ALTHOUGH 'Deliverance' was published four years later than 'Autobiography' - in 1885 - its full title is 'Mark Rutherford's Deliverance, being the second part of an Autobiography'. So the two books in fact constitute one work. In practice, not many readers of the 'Autobiography' embark on its sequel, and it must be admitted that their loss is not as great as it ought to be. 'Deliverance' is decidedly the less successful of the two parts, in spite of its deliberate and intricate relationship with its predecessor: and in what follows I shall concentrate entirely on the first book.

Alone in Hale White's books, the first person pronoun is used here for the central character; but Mark Rutherford is only Hale White himself to the extent that Stephen Dedalus is James Joyce and Paul Morel is D.H. Lawrence. In much of the work, Hale White has altered and added to autobiographical fact in order to convey his theme with as much artistry as possible. This is not to deny either that the theme itself was a product of Hale White's experience, or that Hale White had didactic as well as aesthetic aims. But the work has the form and structure of a novel, and should be read as such.

The story of the first part, the 'Autobiography', is as follows. Mark is the son of Dissenting parents, with vivid childhood memories of the cheerlessness of Dissenting Services and the embarrassments attending an obligatory 'conversion' in adolescence. Faced with the necessity to choose a profession, Mark goes to a Dissenting College near his hometown to prepare for the ministry. He is depressed by the mechanical pieties of his fellow-students, often involving them in unconscious hypocrisy, and also by the external, formalistic nature of the religious instruction given him; luckily he discovers Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads, in which for the first time the depths of his nature are engaged. He is only attracted by those aspects of religion to which he can make a personal response, in spite of the consequent danger of heresy. After a practice sermon, pointing out the universal human relevance of Christ's sacrifice in terms of the innocent always and everywhere suffering for the guilty, he is gently but firmly reprimanded by the authorities for failing to conform to the established simplicity of the Gospel story. His first job on leaving college is with an Independent meeting-house in Water Lane, in

an unnamed small town in the eastern countries. He finds the same totally unsympathetic narrowness, externality and hypocrisy that he had met in his childhood and in the Dissenting college. He gives sermons expressive of his intense personal conviction that Christianity is the religion of the poor, the lonely, and the failures, but finds the same lack of response in his congregation as he had found in his superiors at college. The result is a breakdown, from which, after much suffering, he succeeds in making a partial recovery, but which is henceforward to dog him permanently. It is at this bleak period that he meets Edward Gibbon Mardon, a printer's compositor and an earnest atheist; also his daughter Mary. The effect of Mardon's rationalism is to clear Mark's mind of cant by destroying the inconsistencies in his brand of Christian heresy. And this coincides with a personal crisis: Mark has been unofficially engaged to a girl called Ellen, and now supposes that he no longer loves her; unable to decide what to do, he confides in a certain Miss Arbour, an elderly lady who is one of the few sympathetic members of his congregation, and by telling the story of her own unhappy marriage, long since broken up, she persuades Mark to face the unpleasantness of distressing Ellen now instead of risking permanent distress later. Soon after this, Mark quarrels with one of the most repulsive but also most influential members of his congregation and has to leave. He imagines he can reconcile Unitarianism with his newly-emancipated religious position, and accepts the post of minister at a Unitarian chapel some ten miles away – only to find the same situation as before, a congregation (what there is of it) with whom he can make no contact. Meanwhile his love for Mary, Mardon's daughter, is rejected, and he has to endure another attack of melancholia. Feeling totally ineffectual, he gives up his job and becomes a master at a private school at Stoke Newington; this post he leaves within twenty four hours, after a night's struggle with the worst bout of melancholia yet. After some rebuffs, he succeeds in becoming assistant to a publisher of sceptical books, called Wollaston, and comes to revere his niece, Theresa, despite his continuing love for Mary Mardon. He finds his work congenial and with the best will in the world is inefficient at it, and Theresa helps to cure him of 'self-despisings'. At this point Mardon, whom Mark has not seen since his Unitarian days, becomes very ill, and Mark once more visits him frequently, until his death; soon afterwards Mary dies too – her life had been devoted to that of her father – and Mark breaks down completely. Mark's supposed manuscript finishes here, but his fictitious 'editor', Reuben Shapcott, concludes the book with a brief account of how Mark managed to win through to a state of comparative serenity.

The autobiographical accuracy of the story extends only up to the point when Mark gets into hot water with the authorities on account of heresy. The result in Hale White's case was expulsion, but in Mark's case only a reprimand, followed by the continuation of his studies and the adoption as planned of the ministry as his profession. Only when Mark abandons Unitarianism do fact and fancy meet once more, with his short-lived decision to be a teacher and his employment as publisher's assistant. So the substantial section of the book describing Mark's life as Dissenting Minister — first Independent, then Unitarian — is an imaginative interpolation. And its purpose is that of repetition. A pattern that in Hale White's life was essentially repeated twice, in his childhood and in his college days, is repeated four times in the novel, through the addition of the two periods as minister. This pattern consists of a sharp contrast, between Mark and his environment. Mark is the first of a series of Hale White protagonists who all have in common an inner spiritual vigour that yearns for a response from outside; if it fails to find this response it is liable to become ingrown. However, Mark's environment — the chapel atmosphere of his childhood, the students and staff at the Dissenting College, the congregations at his Independent and Unitarian chapels — is incapable of providing the response for which he craves, because its mode of existence is purely external. By this I mean that it totally lacks the acute awareness of self that Mark possesses to the point of morbidity. The result is a lack of accord between what it is and what it professes; in other words hypocrisy, albeit unconscious. At its most unpleasant this becomes the preaching of loving-kindness and the practice of malice. Now Hale White has gone out of his way to repeat this pattern of frustration four times in order to create a desolating treadmill effect, the 'crowds of people walking round in a ring' of 'the Waste Land'. There is a change of scene, a change of personnel, time goes on — but the same impasse recurs; 'plus ça change ...' The need to evoke this structurally is more important to Hale White than fidelity to autobiographical fact.

The most obvious feature of Mark's environment, as Hale White conveys it, is drabness. This is the outward and visible sign of the betrayal of their real selves by those who inhabit it. Vivid evocations of this drabness occasionally interrupt the spare narrative texture of the first chapter — the lack of ventilation in the chapel in winter so that the windows stream with wet inside, the unappetizing sabbath lunch; and the same kind of thing pervades Mark's adult world. But of course it is the human beings in the environment who reveal its alien nature most directly. A telling piece of irony brings the first chapter to a close, with the brief

description of brother Holderness, the travelling draper: 'He never prayed without telling all of us that there was no health in him, and that his soul was a mass of putrefying sores; but everybody thought the better of him for his self-humiliation. One actual indiscretion, however, brought home to him would have been visited by suspension or expulsion'. The contrast between this and Mark's concern to relate outer profession to his innermost self is decisive; but brother Holderness is innocuous enough compared with a couple of Dissenting personalities with whom Mark has contact in his adulthood. The first of these two is unnamed, and Mark meets him at college. He is 'a blonde youth with greyish eyes, a mouth not quite shut, and an etemal simper upon his face'.¹ He discourses of elevated religious matters 'in a kind of watery rhetoric', but this does not prevent him from being mean in regard to money, nor from marrying a widow with a fortune. His attitude to women is significantly repellent: 'He was always dawdling after "the sex", which was one of his sweet phrases, and yet he was not passionate. Passion... is earnest as flame, and essentially pure'.² In the light of this the ubiquitous 'drabness' in Mark's world is a sign of drained vitality, the natural result of the split between 'inner' and 'outer' among the denizens of Hale White's Waste Land. Passion is a mark of vigour, and so far from being connected with prurience it is its direct opposite. This unnamed member of the Dissenting college is given a fuller portrayal in the Thomas Broad of 'Revolution in Tanner's Lane'. But his spiritual brother in this book is the terrible Mr. Snale, a member of the Water Lane congregation. So akin are they that Hale White is clearly using them as one means of drawing a parallel between the Dissenting College and Water Lane. 'His (Mr. Snale's) way of talking to women and about them was more odious than the way of a debauchee. He invariably called them "the ladies", or more exactly, "the leedies"; and he hardly ever spoke to a "leedy" without a smirk and some faint attempt at a joke'.³ The resemblance to the college student is clear enough. But Mr. Snale has a bigger part to play in the story than the student has, and he is much more substantially created. The picture of him in his domestic setting, in Chapter III, is the best thing in the book up to that point, and typical of Hale White's maturest passages of local description. A so-called 'Dorcas meeting', at which the womenfolk belonging to the chapel collect together and knit clothes for the poor, is being held at Mr. Snale's house. After a brief account of the drawing-room and the tea that has been prepared, Hale White gives us a relatively

¹ 'An Autobiography' (eleventh edition, T. Fisher Unwin) p. 17

² Ibid. p. 18

³ Ibid. p. 29

lengthy description of the pictures round the walls, and in so doing he evokes, obliquely but with vivid economy, the inadequacies of the Snale menage. There are four pictures, one to each wall, a fact in itself suggestive of a kind of dessicated neatness; vitality is commonly associated, in Hale White's fiction, with untidiness — Miss Leroy, in 'Deliverance', is one of many examples. The picture over the mantelpiece is a portrait of Mr. Snale, and opposite is a portrait of his wife. Mr. Snale's 'simper' is faithfully preserved (a facial attribute he shares with the college student 'dawdling after "the sex"'), while Mrs. Snale's portrait has caught 'the peculiarly hard, heavy sensuality' of her eyes; Mark comments that he knew her to be a cruel woman, 'not with the ferocity of the tiger, but with the dull insensibility of a cart-wheel, which will roll over a man's neck as easily as over a flint'.⁴ The full implications of this are suggestive of Gudrun's and Gerald's destructiveness in 'Women in Love'. In a life lived without integrity, without fidelity to one's inner self, passion is replaced by prurience: because it is dessicated, the clean vitality of the tiger's ferocity that is the result of passion (v. Blake!) is replaced by the dull destructiveness of malice — a malice usually disguised by pious gentility in Mr. Snale and the student, but crudely revealed in Mrs. Snale. So much for the two portraits. The passage continues: 'The third picture represented the descent of the Holy Ghost: a number of persons sitting in a chamber, and each one with the flame of a candle on his head. The fourth represented the last day. The Son of God was in a chair surrounded by clouds, and beside him was a flying figure blowing a long mail-coach horn', and so on. It is typical of Hale White's quiet but cutting irony that the two religious pictures should come after the portraits; this is the actual, though not ostensible, order of precedence in the Snale way of life. And the tone of the description vividly conveys the sort of significance 'religion' has in the household.

That is Mark's depressing environment, with which he is so starkly contrasted. The fact that Mark finds it depressing is, of course, one obvious way in which his own personality is conveyed to us. The implications are made clearer in the description of his absorption in 'the Lyrical Ballads' — an oasis in the desert — and in his attempts, so insensitively rebuffed, to teach in his sermons only what he has proved on his pulses. But Mark is in no way idealized, and it is partly his own fault that he is so miserable. In the last paragraph of Chapter II, the chapter describing Mark's college days, we are told that Mark had at that time a dream of 'a perfect friendship'. 'I wanted a friend who would sacrifice himself to me utterly, and to whom I might offer a similar sacrifice. I

⁴Ibid. p. 30

found companions for whom I cared, and who professed to care for me; but I was thirsting for deeper draughts of love than any which they had to offer'. Later in the paragraph Mark is made to judge this attitude from the vantage point of the maturity he has now reached, and he finds its idealism too uncompromising. It resembles too closely the kind of sentiment expressed in the following passage: 'If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood'. This is from Shelley's essay 'On Love', and its aptness to Mark's situation vis-a-vis his companions is striking. But we know what happened to the fictitious poet in 'Alastor'. And at the end of this paragraph in Chapter II Mark is made to express his conviction that if he had not set his sights so high much human affection would have been available to him. So although it is evidence of Mark's sensitivity and integrity that he should be distressed by his environment, it is his idealism, prompting him to withdraw too readily into himself when rebuffed, that drives his distress to the point of acute hypochondria.

He is the victim of three attacks of this hypochondria. The first comes after a sermon he delivers at Water Lane, a sermon whose theme illustrates both the virtues and the dangers attending his attitude; in it he stresses, though without using this text, that 'the kingdom of heaven is within you'. Christ tells us 'that each man should learn to find peace in his own thoughts, his own visions',⁵ that it is *his* response that matters, not anyone else's. Mark then goes on to affirm that Christianity is the religion of the unsuccessful, 'of the man who goes through life thinking much, but who makes few friends and sees nothing come of his thoughts'. In the light of the earlier passage about friendship, it is clear that accompanying the laudable insistence here on total fidelity to one's experience is the insidious threat of self-pity and self-centredness. The sermon meets with no response. As a result, Mark's sense of futility goes beyond its usual limits and he has the sensation of 'sinking into a bottomless abyss'; and this is accompanied by a sense of oncoming madness and a longing for death. The view we are meant to take of his condition is far from simple. On the one hand we see egocentricity taking refuge in illness, and on the other hand we see the anguished sensitivity of acute insight. Perhaps Hamlet's condition provides a parallel here (though no doubt this is as controversial as anything else about that play). Mark's

⁵Ibid. p. 35

second bout of melancholia is directly provoked by Mary Mardon's rejection of him. We shall touch on the circumstances leading up to this later: suffice it to say here that it forms a climax to his increasing sense of deprivation, of being stripped of all support, and so naturally causes him to relapse into a condition from which he had been free for many months.

But it is the third attack that is conveyed most vividly. At this point we are nearing the end of the book; Mark has left both his ministries and has arrived at Stoke Newington to take up his post as schoolmaster. Alone in his room on the night of his arrival, he looks out of the window. 'I went to the window and looked out. There were scattered lights here and there marking roads, but as they crossed one another, and now and then stopped where building had ceased, the effect they produced was that of bewilderment with no clue to it. Further off was the great light of London, like some unnatural dawn, or the illumination from a fire which could not itself be seen'.⁶ The symbolism is unobtrusive but intense, typical of Hale White's best passages. The roads, crossing one another at random, seem frustrated and to have lost their bearings: exactly Mark's case. And the 'unnatural dawn' of the city lights – later in the paragraph called 'the yellow flare of the city' – is suggestive of hell. The last sentence runs: 'I tremble to think how thin is the floor on which we stand which separates us from the bottomless abyss' – taking up a phrase used in the account of his first attack. Another striking feature of the episode is the disproportion between apparent provocation and actual suffering; the dreariness of the empty school and the sparsely furnished bedroom seems inadequate in itself to account for Mark's shattering experience. It may not be fanciful to recall Hamlet once more, dominated by an emotion, in T.S. Eliot's words, 'in excess of the facts as they appear'; or in Eliot's own play, 'The Family Reunion', the emotional plight of Harry Monchenssey, so much out of accord with any factual provocation that it drives his relatives to much obtuse and irrelevant speculation. This element of sheer arbitrariness in Mark's third bout of melancholia emphasises its intense subjectivity – 'the dialogue of the mind with itself', in Arnold's words. But unlike the other two bouts, this is a direct transcription from life. It is a record of the first time that Hale White himself had this terrible experience, as the periods during which Mark is made to have his earlier attacks are purely fictional. If Hale White had been writing straightforward autobiography, he would have had somehow to explain the apparent arbitrariness of this episode. As it is, the preparation, through fiction, of this third attack has been so convincing that there is no need

⁶ Ibid. pp. 112-3

for attempts at explanation that would inevitably muffle the impact.

By this time, however, Mark has emerged from the world of Nonconformist ministries; let us now return to it, and to its atmosphere of sterile repetitiveness. The only hope for a release lies in a change in Mark's attitude: no such change can be expected from the Snales and their spiritual kinsfolk, as they do not have the inner resources to effect it. Now at the height of Mark's 'treadmill' desolation, during his sojourn at Water Lane, two situations arise which begin to compel a change in him — his meeting with the atheist Mardon, and his break with Ellen. Both these situations involve renunciation, but a renunciation that is neither final nor complete: through Mardon, Mark gains the courage to abandon dogmas irrelevant to his purely 'personal' approach to religion, but he resists atheism; in Ellen's case (not *through* Ellen, for here she is the victim rather than the agent of renunciation) Mark gains the courage to remain faithful to his inner self, even at the cost of causing Ellen distress, and as he is not callous this is a high cost. Again the renunciation is incomplete, in fact only temporary, but it is not until we read 'Deliverance' that we find this out. Hale White is not being arbitrary in juxtaposing these situations in the book. In both cases the result is a sharpening of Mark's honesty, his loyalty to what he really feels — and it is this that radically distinguishes him from the Snales and their ilk. But of course giving something up is a negative matter, the necessary demolition that precedes construction. To emphasise this negativeness, as it were atmospherically, Mardon is made to fall ill and lie at the point of death just after Mark has given up Ellen; and immediately after that the tension between Mark and Mr. Snale comes to a head and Mark has to leave Water Lane.

Mardon has idiosyncracies of 'character' in the Dickensian sense. We are told that early in his life he changed his Christian names 'Edward Gibson' to 'Edward Gibbon' to accord with his scepticism. Then at his first meeting with Mark, once he has said what he has to say he leaves with an unceremonious abruptness. Both these oddities reflect, on another dimension, the cheerful vigour and uncompromising forthrightness of his spiritual life, qualities which have committed him to an unwavering atheism. Dickens, of course, would have exploited his oddities; but Hale White, after his initial hinting at 'personality', concentrates with typical economy on Mardon's function in the novel, which is to teach Mark honesty of mind through discussion. There is a direct vigour in Mardon's speech, however, that is sufficiently in character for us to feel that he is not simply the mouthpiece for a point of view in an intellectual debate.

Mark's relationship with Mardon reaches a climax when he is in a par-

ticularly forlorn state: he has broken with Ellen, and he has broken with Water Lane. Will he accordingly break entirely with his religious faith and follow Mardon into atheism? The episode that provides a decisive answer to this question seems to me the finest single passage in the entire work. It begins with Mark calling on Mardon to discuss with him what he should do now that he has given up his post at Water Lane. First Mardon gives Mark the advice one would expect him to give, that if he has any doubts about what he would have to profess as a minister he should 'leave the whole business and prefer the merest handicraft'. Mardon then goes on to define his atheism in a more logically elaborate manner than we have yet seen him do. The mere profession of the existence of God, he says, is meaningless unless one can define His attributes; and he challenges Mark to produce any divine attributes that he, Mardon, cannot simply interpret as 'the laws which govern the universe and man'. Mark speaks of 'an intellect of which these laws are the expression', but on Mardon's insistent probing he cannot give any account of what sort of intellect it can be. All Mark can do is to fall back on sentiment. He feels that an 'intellect' — God — exists, and that is that; he may, he says, be prostrated by Mardon's logic again and again, but he will always pick himself up with the aid of sentiment. Mardon's reply has its usual decisiveness and it closes the argument: 'When my friends go into the cloud, I never try to follow them'.

At this point Mardon's daughter, Mary, who keeps house for her father and looks after him, interrupts; and what follows demands a more extensive quotation:

'All this time Mary had been sitting in the armchair against the fireplace in her usual attitude, resting her head on her hand and with her feet one over the other on the fender. She had been listening silently and motionless. She now closed her eyes and said —

"Father, father, it is not true".

"What is not true?"

"I do not mean that what you have said about theology is not true, but you make Mr. Rutherford believe you are what you are not. Mr. Rutherford, father sometimes tells us he has no sentiment, but you must take no notice of him when he talks in that way. I always think of our visit to the seaside two years ago. The railway station was in a disagreeable part of the town, and when we came out we walked along a dismal row of very plain-looking houses. There were cards in the window with 'Lodgings' written on them, and father wanted to go in and ask the terms. I said that I did not wish to stay in such a dull street, but father could not afford to pay for a sea view, and so we went in to inquire.

We then found that what we thought were the fronts of the houses were the backs, and that the fronts faced the bay. They had pretty gardens on the other side, and a glorious sunny prospect over the ocean". Mardon laughed and said –

"Ah, Mary, there is no sea-front, and no garden".

I took up my hat and said I must go. Both pressed me to stop, but I declined. Mardon urged me again, and at last said –

"I believe you've never once heard Mary sing."⁷

After an initial protest, Mary got out 'the Messiah' and sang 'He was despised,' Mark is profoundly moved.

'I seemed to be listening to the tragedy of all human worth and genius. The ball rose in my throat, the tears mounted to my eyes, and I had to suppress myself rigidly. Presently she ceased. There was silence for a moment. I looked round and saw that Mardon's face was on the table, buried in his hands. I felt that I had better go, for the presence of a stranger, when the heart is deeply stirred, is an intrusion. I noiselessly left the room, and Mary followed. When we got to the door she said: "I forgot that mother used to sing that song. I ought to have known better." Her own eyes were full; I thought the pressure of her hand as she bade me goodbye was a little firmer than usual, and as we parted an overmastering impulse seized me. I lifted her hand to my lips; without giving her time to withdraw it, I gave one burning kiss, and passed out into the street. It was pouring with rain, and I had neither overcoat nor umbrella, but I heeded not the heavens, and not till I got home to my own fireless, dark, solitary lodgings, did I become aware of any contrast between the sphere into which I had been exalted and the earthly commonplace world by which I was surrounded.'⁸

Mary's tale about the seaside is an example, though a brief one, of Hale White's favourite device of dovetailing stories within stories. On the face of it, it is inconsequential. How does it establish her point that her father does not lack 'sentiment'? Presumably she implies that he was moved by the sudden, unexpected view of the sea from their lodgings. And Hale White has carefully prepared us for the symbolic force of this. In their dialogue just before, Mark tries to counter Mardon's logicity with the following assertion: 'I cannot help thinking that the man who looks upon the stars, or the articulation of a leaf, is irresistibly impelled, unless he has been corrupted by philosophy, to say, "There is intellect

⁷ Ibid. pp. 89-90

⁸ Ibid. p. 91

there."⁹ One of the most important elements in the two books is the stark contrast Mark feels between the drabness of his social environment and the glory of nature; he feels this even as a child, in the first chapter, he finds relief from Water Lane in walking along the riverbank to catch sight of the open sea; and it is on this note, in the last chapter of 'Deliverance', that the whole work ends. So here, in this tale of Mary's, we have the same contrast. Mardon is quick to make a cynical retort; but the fact remains that he has had the same experience as Mark, though his intellect (we are meant to feel) has refused to allow it any credentials. His reaction to Mary's song is, of course, more direct evidence of his capacity for feeling, and its position immediately after Mary's tale about the seaside is poignantly effective. But Hale White is killing several birds with one stone here, so that the conclusion has a complexity typical of his best passages. It is not only Mardon who feels the effect of the song, but Mark. The sentiment, 'he was despised and rejected of many', is one of the aspects of the Christian story to which Mark has been able to make an acute personal response. It was precisely on that theme that he gave the sermon at Water Lane whose dull, passive reception induced his first bout of melancholia; and the reason for his being so moved by the theme is, of course, his own sense of being lonely and isolated; indeed, there is an element of self-pity in his attitude that eventually has to be chastened. It is only too natural that he should experience a sudden upsurge of love for Mary at such a point; and his expression of it is a fitting and moving close to the chapter. But the Shellayan love-yearning (see again, the essay 'On Love') cannot be satisfied so easily. He proposes to her in the next chapter and she rejects him, thus causing his second acute attack of melancholia.

However, in his earlier affair of the heart — with Ellen — it was he who had done the rejecting. Now we have already seen that there is a parallel between Mark's rejection of religious dogma, through Mardon, and his rejection of Ellen. In both cases Mark is for some time, before the rejection, in a state of uncertainty. For years the Ellen affair had been jogging along comfortably in the form of a friendly correspondence; then a domestic crisis occurred which put Ellen in such a position that Mark was forced to bring matters to a head — either to marry her or reject her. In the account of his agony of indecision there is a touch that relates it to his increasing indecision over religion: 'In my distress I knelt down and prayed, but the heavens remained impassive as before, and *I was half ashamed of what I had done, as if it were a piece of hypocrisy.*' (italics mine).¹⁰ It is Miss Arbour who persuades Mark to be courageous

⁹ Ibid. p. 88

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 58-9

and break with Ellen; and on the face of it this is the right decision. But in 'Deliverance' Mark recovers his love for her and marries her, and this is the last stage in his recovery. So, are we finally meant, with the benefit of hindsight, to regard his earlier decision as mistaken? This is not easy to answer. There is certainly a large measure of egotism in his reluctance to marry Ellen, as he himself acknowledges.

I became at once aware that my affection for her, if it ever really existed, had departed. I saw before me the long days of wedded life with no sympathy, and I shuddered when I thought what I should do with such a wife. How could I take her to Mardon? How could I ask him to come to me? Strange to say, my pride suffered most. I could have endured, I believe, even discord at home, if only I could have had a woman whom I could present to my friends, and whom they would admire. I was never unselfish in the way in which women are, and yet I have always been more anxious that people should respect my wife than respect me, and at any time would withdraw myself into the shade if only she might be brought into the light. This is nothing noble. It is an obscure form of egotism probably...¹¹

In fact the egotism is not all that obscure, consisting as it does of a plausible combination of shyness and snobbery. And there is a clear link between this and the immature idealism of his Shelleyan love-yearnings. Also, Miss Arbour's tale has only a superficial bearing on Mark's predicament, though it is intended as an awful warning. Mark is disturbed that Ellen has none of his intellectual interests; Miss Arbour's husband had none of *her* intellectual interests, and the marriage was disastrous. The inference is clear. But before his visit to Miss Arbour, while miserably attempting to weigh up Ellen's virtues and defects, Mark had been constrained to admit that she 'had no vice of temper, no meanness'; but 'meanness' is one of the defects in her husband that Miss Arbour singles out for special emphasis. The full extent of Ellen's worth only becomes clear to us in 'Deliverance', and at this stage we know more about Miss Arbour's husband. But at least we realize that they are in essentials quite unlike each other, even if they have in common a dislike of reading. This does not mean that the story is irrelevant, but that its relevance, with a profound irony, is the opposite of what Miss Arbour intends. As far as capacity for marital harmony goes, Mark, despite his love of reading, is more nearly akin to the cultureless Mr. Hexton than to Miss Arbour, since what his disaffection with Ellen really shows is an insensitivity to qualities not his own — exactly Mr. Hexton's case. This reveals a link

¹¹Ibid. p. 57

between Mark and those he feels most alien to, since Mr. Hexton has obvious affinities with Mr. Snale and the Dissenting College student. So it is fortunate that Mark follows Miss Arbour's advice and rejects Ellen, if only to avoid a prospect that neither he nor Miss Arbour envisaged, that of becoming — in his own way and far less harshly — another Mr. Hexton. And Mark is also right to make this painful decision from another point of view, that of preserving his integrity. However ignoble the reasons for the loss of his affection, it *is* lost, and he is faithful to his feelings in acting upon that recognition.

So far, Mark has been either the victim or the agent of a series of deprivations. He has rejected his environment (or his environment has rejected him — it works both ways), he has rejected Ellen, he has rejected the greater part of Christian orthodoxy while still remaining this side of theism, he has been rejected by Mary Mardon. The impression that all this produces is that of a sensitive individual driven both by his virtues and his defects into greater and greater isolation. Apart from Nature and 'the Lyrical Ballads', nothing has encouraged Mark yet to cultivate any positive zest for life. The influence of Miss Arbour and Mardon has certainly been salutary, in stimulating a courageous use of the will and clarity of mind; but this has been devoted to renunciation, a negative virtue. Only with the entry of the butterfly-catcher and Mrs. Lane, in the Unitarian period of Mark's life, is any sort of positive prescription for living suggested.

Mrs. Lane, in her non-intellectual vitality, is the first of a long line of Hale White characters. She is too independent to be patient with convention, and yet she is profoundly moral. Mark's religious speculations are quite outside her province, and yet 'she was the only person in the village whose conversation was lifted out of the petty and personal into the region of the universal.'¹² ('Universal', as we shall see, is a key-word in the book). The main point is that she, like Mark, is in total contrast to her environment, and yet manifests a down-to-earth vigour of which Mark is sadly in need. However, she is not one of the book's successes. Mary says she was of 'incalculable service' to him, a claim which makes the poverty of Hale White's rendering of her the more conspicuous. There is a brief anecdote to illustrate her independence of spirit; otherwise, just bare assertions.

The butterfly-catcher, also, is ineffectively rendered. The fact that he is referred to only by that title and is otherwise unnamed is at once ominous, as it suggests a vein of allegorical fantasy that is alien to the work as a whole. And he does not have the colourfulness of fantasy; in-

¹² Ibid. p. 102

stead, we are simply aware of a character whose thematic function Hale White is so concerned to emphasise that he scarcely troubles about characterisation at all. Nor is there the unostentatious but intense use of symbol that gives Mardon such memorableness in the scene with his daughter and Mark that we have looked at. Nevertheless, the attitude the butterfly-catcher represents is of central importance in Hale White's fiction.

This attitude is first touched on in one of those relevant allusions so characteristically unobtrusive as easily to escape attention. It comes in Miss Arbour's tale, when Mr. Hexton's meanness is being stressed; we are told that there was 'not a single chink, however narrow, through which his soul looked out of itself upon the great world around. If he had kept bees, or collected butterflies or beetles, I could have found some avenue of approach.'¹³ And this is the function of the butterfly-catcher's occupation: to enable his soul to 'look out of itself upon the great world around.' Mark first meets him while on a solitary walk in the contrary. The man is carrying a net and he tells Mark that he has come seven miles to try to catch a specimen of a particularly rare species of butterfly. He gives Mark an open invitation to see his collection, and after some weeks Mark calls on him. He then learns that the man's hobby is an antidote to an otherwise unendurable sorrow, whose cause he cannot bring himself to describe. His first reaction to grief was to indulge in fruitless and Hamlet-like speculations on death, and on what, if anything, comes afterwards. Collecting butterflies was a release from this sterile morbidity, because it was its exact opposite. Instead of occupying himself with cloudy pseudo-profundities, which in spite of their cosmic aura were essentially egocentric, he could turn his mind outwards with the aid of a scientific discipline. There is nothing dilettantist about his occupation; it is concerned with hard fact rather than romantic reverie. Mark goes away much impressed, and later finds out from another source the cause of the butterfly-catcher's sorrow. First his wife died in childbirth; then his son, to whom he was devoted, grew up crippled both in body and soul, and died in an asylum.

It is clear that the butterfly-catcher's history is another example of Hale White's favourite device of presenting us with parallel instances of his theme, a device we have already seen operating in the fourfold repetition of Mark's desolate environment, and also in Miss Arbour's tale (though in that case, ironically, a pseudo-parallel). The point here is that the butterfly-catcher's sad experience is Mark's own, though more extreme and melodramatic. Basically, it consisted of a brooding egocentricity

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 65

resulting from the thwarting of the ability to love, which is exactly Mark's plight. And the remedy – confining oneself to fact instead of losing oneself in an 'O Altitudo' – is a central preoccupation later of 'Miriam's Schooling', and to a lesser extent, 'Catherine Furze'.

The whole attitude is clearly relevant to Mark's incompetence as a publisher's assistant, in the last section of the book, although the butterfly-catcher does not appear and is not referred to. This incompetence Mark ascribes to 'forgetfulness and a want of thoroughness in investigation', and it produces yet another crisis of melancholia, this time not in solitude but in the presence of Theresa, to whom he insists that he is good for nothing. These two failings of his are directly opposite to the butterfly-catcher's 'outgoing' concern for scientific precision; by contrast, they suggest the ineffectualness produced by egocentric brooding. The butterfly-catcher himself may have gone from the scene, but what he stands for is here conspicuous in its stark absence.

We have seen that Hale White organizes his work through contrasts and parallels. Now in this last episode Wallaston the publisher is an atheist like Mardon, but of a rigid and insensitive kind. He has adopted his creed and attached it to himself; it is not the articulation of inner experience as in Mardon's case. We have, in fact, the contrast between inner and outer that is basic to the novel. On the face of it Wallaston is like Mardon, but in reality he is more like the Snales, even though he is much more agreeable. Theresa (in real life George Eliot – the whole episode is based upon Hale White's experience as assistant to John Chapman, the original for Wallaston) is parallel to several earlier characters. Like Mark, she is passionate and convinced of the overriding importance of passion; but unlike Mark, she is courageous, totally clear-thinking and uncompromising in her assertion of exactly what she thinks – all of which allies her to Mardon and his daughter; the piquant combination of Mark and Mardon in her is especially seen in the intellectuality with which, according to Mark, she seems to grasp the importance of passion: 'the senses at the tip of the intellect', to adapt T.S. Eliot's dictum on Donne; also, we are reminded of the butterfly-catcher when she rebukes Mark for preferring Beethoven to Mozart: 'He (Beethoven) encourages a luxurious revelling in the incomprehensible and indefinitely sublime. He is not good for you.'¹⁴

All this is conveyed with both vividness and economy, and Theresa is one of the book's conspicuous successes. The forceful directness of her speech is convincingly idiosyncratic. Take the following passage:

I happened to say that I wished people who wrote novels would not

¹⁴Ibid. p. 125

write as if love were the very centre and sum of human existence. A man's life was made up of so much besides love, and yet novelists were never weary of repeating the same story, telling it over and over again in a hundred different forms.

"I do not agree with you", said Theresa. "I disagree with you utterly. I dislike foolish inane sentiment — it makes me sick; but I do believe, in the first place, that no man was ever good for anything who has not been devoured, I was going to say, by a great devotion to a woman. The lives of your great men are as much the history of women whom they adored as of themselves. Dante, Byron, Shelley, it is the same with all of them, and there is no mistake about it; it is the great fact of life. What would Shakespeare be without it? and Shakespeare *is* life. A man, worthy to be named a man, will find the fact of love perpetually confronting him until he reaches old age, and if he be not ruined by worldliness or dissipation, will be troubled by it when he is fifty as much as when he was twenty-five. It is the subject of all subjects. People abuse love, and think it is the cause of half the mischief in the world. It is the one thing that keeps the world straight, and if it were not for that overpowering instinct, human nature would fall asunder; would be the prey of inconceivable selfishness and vices, and finally, there would be universal suicide. I did not intend to be eloquent: I hate being eloquent. But you did not mean what you said; you spoke from the head or teeth merely".

Theresa's little speech was delivered not with any heat of the blood. There was no excitement in her grey eyes, nor did her cheek burn. Her brain seemed to rule everything. This was an idea she had, and she kindled over it because it was an idea'.¹⁵

It is ironical that this vigorous repudiation of Mark's opinion is in fact an assertion of Mark's real position; so that the passage demonstrates both Theresa's force of personality and Mark's lack of it. Another irony is that Mark's assertion about Theresa that 'her brain seemed to rule everything' is precisely what she said of him at the end of her speech, and the irony is clearly in her favour. Then a little later comes another of those beautifully expressive uses of symbol of which we have already seen examples. The passage begins as follows:

'One evening there was a little party, and the conversation flagged. Theresa said that it was a great mistake to bring people together with nothing special to do but talk. Nothing is more tedious than to be in a company assembled for no particular reason, and every host, if he asks

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 127

more than two persons at the outside, ought to provide some entertainment. Talking is worth nothing unless it is perfectly spontaneous, and it cannot be spontaneous if there are sudden and blank silences, and nobody can think of a fresh departure.¹⁶

Someone resents the tone of Theresa's remarks and reminds her that she is the hostess and it is up to her to find some amusement. She agrees, and decides to give a recitation. She chooses 'the Lass of Lochroyan'.

'There is a passage in the middle of the poem, in which Lord Gregory's cruel mother pretends she is Lord Gregory, and refuses to recognise his former love, Annie of Lochroyan, as she stands outside his tower. The mother calls to Annie from the inside.

"'Gin thou be Annie Lochroyan
 (As I trow thou binna she),
 Now tell me some of the love tokens
 That passed between thee and me'.
 'Oh dinna ye mind, Lord Gregory,
 As we sat at the wine,
 We changed the rings frae our fingers,
 And I can show thee thine?
 Oh yours was gude, and gude enough,
 But aye the best was mine;
 For yours was o' the gude red gowd,
 But mine o' the diamond fine.'"

The last verse is as noble as anything in any ballad in the English language, and I thought that when Theresa was half way through it her voice shook a good deal. There was a glass of flowers standing near her, and just as she came to an end her arm moved and the glass was in a moment on the floor, shattered into twenty pieces. I happened to be watching her, and felt perfectly sure that the movement of her arm was not accidental, and that her intention was to conceal, by the apparent mishap, an emotion which was increasing and becoming inconvenient. At any rate, if that was her object it was perfectly accomplished, for the recitation was abruptly terminated, there was general commiseration over the shattered vase, and when the pieces were picked up and order was restored, it was nearly time to separate.¹⁷

Annie of Lochroyan may think that the love she has to offer is being

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 127

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 128-9

spurned, but she is very well aware of its value: it is made of 'the diamond fine'. Theresa is much moved by this, because it clearly relates to something in her own nature. And not only hers, but Mark's too, since we recollect his intense, Shelleyan conviction that he had a fund of love within him and no object to expend it upon. Her emotion and her desire to conceal it – beautifully conveyed by the deliberate breaking of the glass – show that her views, expressed earlier, on the supreme importance for a man of a woman's love were proved on her pulses, and refute Mark's implied contention that she could think but not feel. The basic point that is being established in this section of the book is that Theresa is profoundly akin to Mark, but is also sufficiently different for her example to be a lesson to him; he could profit from her unflinching precision of thought and her courageous forthrightness of expression; and nobody could be less likely than she to give way to self-involved melancholia.

The last few pages of the 'Autobiography' concern the death of Mardon. 'One thing I am sure of', he says to Mark, one day during his last illness, 'is that a man ought to rid himself as much as possible of the miserable egotism which is so anxious about self, and should be more and more anxious about the universal'.¹⁸ We have met this last word before. It was used, as we noted, of Mrs. Lane, to stress the way in which she contrasts with the pettiness of her environment. Miss Arbour uses the word in connection with Mr. Hexton: 'I do not believe', she says, 'there was a single point in Mr. Hexton's character in which he touched the universal,'¹⁹ and she then goes on, in a passage we have already looked at, to suggest that it might have been different if he 'had kept bees or collected butterflies or beetles' – and we have seen that, implicit in the butterfly-catcher episode, is the paradox that a precise concentration on minutiae can touch on the universal.

Mary Mardon soon follows her father to the grave, and Mark is 'utterly broken-hearted.' He is more melancholy than ever before, as he is forced to stop working altogether and have a long holiday. But instead of becoming permanently embittered, he gradually acquires a peace of mind he had never known before. Partly this is the result of his renewed acquaintance with the butterfly-catcher, even though he never takes up a similar hobby. He gets a new job, as parliamentary reporter, and at this point the 'Autobiography' closes. Hale White's writing in this last section might well appear oddly perfunctory: Mark stops narrating altogether after the account of Mardon's death: his manuscript, we are told, comes to an end at this point and 'Reuben Shapcott', his fictitious editor, describes

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 133

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 65

the subsequent turning-point in Mark's spiritual history in a mere two pages. If this turning-point were anything akin to the spiritual rebirth described and celebrated by T.S. Eliot in his poetry, or to the blessing of the water-snakes in 'The Ancient Mariner', then this laconic treatment would undoubtedly be inadequate. But Hale White's theme is not sin and redemption from sin; Mark has never belonged to the Waste Land he has seen about him. So Mark's 'deliverance' is a gradual checking process rather than a sudden sense of spiritual release: a checking of over-subjectivity, with its concomitant egotism, and over-aspiration. All the materials for this process have been given us, and Mark's application of them does not involve anything new. Of course the brief conclusion would be anti-climatic if there were no sequel to describe the results of Mark's newfound tranquillity; but such a sequel is given us in 'Deliverance.'