



Introduction

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones.

And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.

And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.

(Ezekiel 37.1–3)

A young lady leans over a gravestone, the other side of which is an open grave and the exhumed remains of one John Faithful which lie exposed on the earth. She stands in a sunlit churchyard, close to the ivy-clad church and beneath a spreading chestnut tree. She wears a red dress, a straw bonnet trimmed with flowers, and a black shawl. To the late twentieth-century viewer, Henry Bowler's *The Doubt: 'Can These Dry Bones Live?'* (illustration 1) typifies 'Victorian religious doubt', the neutrality of the lady's expression and her unfocused gaze suggesting that, from her own perspective, the stark reality of these 'dry bones' has thrown the hope of life after death into doubt. But the question is: for how long?

For the observant visitor to the Royal Academy in 1855, this genre painting in the Pre-Raphaelite style contained more signs of hope of resurrection than signs of death and corruption. Unlike the lady standing behind the gravestone, the Victorian viewer could read and interpret the message of the familiar inscriptions on the two gravestones in the foreground ('I am the Resurrection and the Life' (John 11.25) and 'Resurgam'), and could relate these to two traditional symbols of new life and resurrection – the germinating chestnut on the flat stone, and the butterfly which sits on the skull.¹ So the Victorian viewer could read the subject's doubt as only fleeting, whereas such an interpretation is

2 Heaven, Hell and the Victorians

less obvious today. Had Christina Rossetti visited the Academy that year (she was in fact ill, and probably missed the show), she might well have thought about the individualism of Bowler's application of the text from the story of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37. (She herself was to apply it in a more orthodox way to the Conversion of the Jews in a poem written four years later.²) She would certainly have understood Bowler's use of a tradition of analogy between scriptural revelation (the texts on the gravestones) and nature (the chestnut and the butterfly) that came down to the Victorians from Bishop Butler and the eighteenth century, a subject to which we will return in Chapter 1.

Bowler's painting was intended as an illustration to Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), the most important poem of the Victorian period on the subject of death and the future life. T. S. Eliot's famous observation that the poem's faith is a 'poor thing', but its doubt 'a very intense experience'³ has proved to be influential in the late twentieth century: one eminent modern critic argues, for example, that '*In Memoriam* is seldom specifically Christian'.⁴ Yet at the turn of the twentieth century, Frederic Harrison had disparagingly described Tennyson's poems as 'exquisitely graceful re-statements of the current theology of the broad-Churchmen of the school of F. D. Maurice and Jowett'.⁵

Similarly with Dickens, whose more sceptical side in matters of religion has been emphasized by most recent critics. Yet even in his last completed work, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), the central symbolic actions of rising and falling – worked out in the novel's social climbing and abrupt descents, the amassing and removal of dust heaps, a cityscape of airy rooftops and dark labyrinthine streets, and a river of drownings and rescues – is underpinned with a theological understanding of the fall, baptism, and man's redemption through love. The novel affirms the hope of a future life in Christ in ways which place Dickens in the same liberal Broad Church tradition as the Tennyson of *In Memoriam*, for all their differences within that tradition.⁶

For many critics in the modern, mainly secular western world, religion in historical literature is something of an embarrassment, and particularly Victorian religion in Victorian literature. The more strongly held the religious faith, the more violent can be the reaction against it. Take, for example, a famous moment of crisis in Victorian religious poetry, when the tall nun is drowning in Gerard Manley Hopkins's *The Wreck*

of the *Deutschland* (written 1876) and the poet struggles to share in and describe her vision:

But how shall I . . . make me room there:
 Reach me a . . . Fancy, come faster –
 Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there,
 Thing that she . . . There then! the Master,
Ipse, the only one, Christ, King, Head:
 He was to cure the extremity where he had cast her;
 Do, deal, lord it with living and dead;
 Let him ride, her pride, in his triumph, despatch
 and have done with his doom there.⁷

Now compare two modern interpretations of the stanza. One critic argues that for Hopkins, preparing for ordination as a Jesuit priest, the nun's miraculous visitation by Christ, in which she apprehends in her drowning and gasping for breath the *Ipse* or very self of her 'Master', was specifically eucharistic, the word *Ipse* being associated with the minor elevation in the mass.⁸ Another, less sympathetic towards the poem's Roman Catholic content, describes this as 'the orgasmic stanza', where Hopkins makes the tall nun's death 'resemble a combination of sexual intercourse and a cavalry charge'.⁹

This study on *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians* sets out to work with the grain of the writers discussed rather than against it; to do more reconstruction (of the historical context) than deconstruction (of the literary text); to read the ambiguities of Victorian religious terms as features of a shared language of consolation; and to argue that this consolation was grounded in a specifically Christian hope, and was not merely a symptom of evasion, repression or wish-fulfilment in the face of death and bereavement. In terms of subject-matter the emphasis falls on re-examining nineteenth-century theological questions associated with death, judgment, heaven, and hell (the 'four last things'), and showing how these questions are reflected in the work of the creative writers. But the word 'reflected' suggests some kind of gap or separation between theology and literature, whereas the Victorian interpretative project discussed in this book was often in fact shared by creative writers and theologians in their engagement with the great mysteries of death and the future life, and with the challenges associated with those mysteries in the nineteenth century, including problems of evidence, authority, and language.

4 Heaven, Hell and the Victorians

Eschatology – the study of the four last things – was a highly controversial subject in the Victorian Age, as even a glance through any collection of religious tracts or indeed serious general periodicals of the period will reveal. In the absence of definite and coherent teaching on heaven and hell in the New Testament, a wide range of doctrinal positions, each based upon a few individual texts, were defended on sectarian lines. Four conflicting views on eternal damnation were current in the 1870s, for example, and two ideas of heaven – as community or as a place of worship – proved difficult to reconcile. Some of the radical truth claims in the New Testament concerning the future life, which had always seemed either enigmatic or contradictory, now became questionable in the light of the Higher Criticism of the Bible, which raised new questions about the origin and authenticity of some of the most familiar New Testament stories of healing and raising from the dead.

In grappling with eschatological themes and debates in particular, theologians and creative writers reopened some of the key questions concerning the nature of religious belief and language. Both preachers and poets, for example, confronted the problem of finding a language which could convey an idea of the transcendent in an increasingly scientific-materialist world. The sense of the miraculous captured in the biblical account of a girl being raised from the dead in a house in first-century Palestine is difficult to transfer to a suburban villa where the doctor is expected, in Victorian fiction. Hans Frei, in his study of the relationship between realist narrative and the ‘Eclipse of Biblical Narrative’, shows how in the second half of the eighteenth century (in Britain the period of the rise of the novel) a great reversal had taken place in German biblical criticism: interpretation had become a matter of ‘fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story’.¹⁰ The Victorian novelist or poet who attempted to write of the ‘invisible world’ in a secular form and from a this-worldly perspective faced a similar challenge. In the attempt to speak of that which is ‘beyond words’ or to narrate the unnarratable, such as death and the future life, language comes under great pressure, and communication – in deathbed scenes, for example – can break down. As we will see later, however, one of the great paradoxes associated with these themes is that it is precisely at such moments of breakdown that the possibility of faith manifests itself.

At the centre of these concerns lies a tension between two models of reality. What we can label ‘horizontal’ models are based on our day-to-day human experience of moving through a world of clock time and solid objects. In contrast, ‘vertical’ models, which are predominant in the Bible, tell God’s story rather than our story, and are often ‘catastrophist’ and interventionist in terms of time and history, rather than ‘gradualist’ and neutral. For example, in Victorian deathbed and graveyard scenes the dying person passes from life to death (or the ‘next world’, depending on one’s perspective), via an ambiguous phase in which a ‘horizontal’ process of decline is marked off by two disruptive (and ‘vertical’) moments: that in which death is anticipated, and the moment of death itself. In the Victorian Age, highly conventionalized social customs and funerary rituals eased the transition from the deathbed to the bed that is the grave, and consolatory Christian literature emphasized the continuities between this life and the next, and particularly the idea of heaven as community. Yet the burial service in the Book of Common Prayer did not reinforce these manageable stages of separation for Victorian mourners. Rather it consoled them, as it had their ancestors, through affirmations of faith which are based upon some of the most challenging paradoxes and contraries in the New Testament, including passages from John and II and I Corinthians 15, which speak of life in death, of incorruption in corruption, of rising in descending. Such paradoxes and contraries are finally resolved only through faith.

The horizontal dimension of temporal process and deferral comes to the fore in the Victorian realist novel, and ‘the sense of an ending’; in millenarian epic poems on ‘the course of time’; and in doctrines of purgatory and the ‘intermediate state’ between death and the last judgment, whereby final divine dispensations are deferred. In moments of spiritual crisis, however, whether in fiction, poetry, or spiritual autobiography, the horizontality of everyday existence is disrupted as a person experiences some kind of vision of judgment, as in Browning’s *Easter-Day*, for example. But whereas death and judgment are problematic subjects for the writer because of their contradictory or ambiguous nature as process in and through time, heaven and hell present the quite opposite problem of being fixed states. How can one write about states that are changeless and ‘beyond words’? In practice, Victorian poets and hymn-writers exploit in new ways the creative tension inherent in

6 Heaven, Hell and Victorians

Christian tradition where the kingdom is described as being both here *and* elsewhere, and paradise as both now *and* not yet.

In the chapters that follow, each of the four last things is discussed in turn, drawing upon a wide range of material from the period 1830–90, some of which is familiar – novels by the Brontës and George Eliot, poems by Browning and Arnold, autobiographical works by Newman and Carlyle, and paintings by Martin and Millais – and some unfamiliar – tracts by Father Furniss of Dublin, the literary and devotional works of Revd Edward Henry Bickersteth, Vicar of Hampstead, and the memoirs of Catharine Tait, wife of a future Archbishop of Canterbury. Suggestions are offered in a short Conclusion as to how the concepts, models, and methodologies identified in the book inform four of the best known major works of Victorian literature which address the subjects of death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

First, however, in order better to understand the mind and imagination of an educated Victorian viewer of Bowler's *The Doubt* or reader of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, we need to review a number of questions relating to the Bible – its teaching, authority, and language – which were live issues in the nineteenth century.

A LIVELY HOPE

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you,

Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1.3–5)

This is the opening of a doxology, or liturgical form of praise, for the risen Christ, and its tone is necessarily direct and authoritative. The epistle of which it is a part was addressed to young Christian communities which could expect to suffer cruel persecution, and offered a radiant message of hope for those who were committed to a difficult pilgrimage: the future is to be anticipated in joyful expectation, and embraced in

certainty. This was not the place in which to introduce commentary upon the nature of the 'last time', or of Christ's promise of eternal life. Each of the key terms in the passage, however, would have had a very specific resonance for its first readers, and was to be the subject of much detailed exegesis in the nineteenth century, as we will see in later chapters. 'Lively' or 'living', for example, suggests a divinely inspired hope, since life is God's prerogative.¹¹ 'Hope' was a recognized technical term of the Pharisees, used by Paul in his testimony to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem: 'I am a Pharisee, a son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question' (Acts 23.6). These words caused a dispute between the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection of the body, and the Sadducees, who denied it. The concept of the resurrection of the body was an apocalyptic hope current in traditional Palestinian Judaism at the time of Christ, and often came into conflict with that of the immortality of the soul and a future life immediately after death, in Hellenistic Judaism.¹² Although the matter is still contested, most theologians today consider resurrection to be the basis of sound doctrine, as the whole person is thereby raised to new life, and no final separation between the body and the soul is implied.¹³ At a time when persecution was an imminent threat, as in I Peter, teaching on the resurrection of the body would have been sharply relevant.

The closing words of verse 5, 'in the last time' (*en kairō eschatō*; NEB 'at the end of time') introduce the concept of the *eschaton*. The nineteenth-century term 'eschatology' has been used in several different but related senses.¹⁴ In this book it will be used in the traditional sense of 'death, judgment, heaven, and hell' (*OED*), and the science or study of these four last things. In I Peter the end of all things is said to be 'at hand' (4.7). The apostles lived in the end-time, as Christ had already died and been raised from the dead. Thus, paradoxically, the 'lively hope' of the doxology is already an 'eschatological blessing'.¹⁵ (Similarly, New Testament metaphors of 'first fruits' and an 'earnest' of blessings to come, associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit, emphasize a continuity between eternal life as a present possession and as a future promise.)¹⁶

For the first Christians, the end-time was to be completed in the *parousia* ('coming' or 'presence'), usually identified with the return or second coming of Christ.¹⁷ Jesus's own teaching on the *parousia* had been received as a definitive prophecy of the imminent end of the present world order, and of the coming of the kingdom. As the decades passed,

however, without the hoped for *parousia* being fulfilled, the question of the state of the dead between their ‘falling asleep’ and the general resurrection became increasingly pressing, and Christian writers encountered difficulties in harmonizing the idea of a post-mortem existence with God, in heaven, and Jewish eschatology which looked to the final judgment. (In the Middle Ages, Roman Catholic teaching on purgatory was to draw upon patristic writings which grappled with the same problem.) The writer of the Second Epistle of Peter (which has no connection with the first) anticipates ‘that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation’ (2 Peter 3.3–4).

Paul tackled these and other difficulties in the finest chapter on the subject of death and the future life in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15, where he wrote to members of the church in Corinth who shared the hostility of Hellenistic Judaism towards the resurrection of the body:

But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen.

. . . .

For if the dead arise not, then is not Christ raised:

And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.

Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

(1 Corinthians 15.13, 16–19)

Paul, a Pharisee before his conversion, would have believed in a *general* resurrection. His analogy, however, of the sowing of the ‘bare grain’ (15.37) denotes a quality of relationship, not of substance, in the Christian scheme, and he avoids description of the *modus operandi* of resurrection: ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body’ (15.44).¹⁸ Similarly, the last judgment is a mystery: ‘Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump’ (15.51–2). It is thus implied that not all who read the epistle will have died when the trumpet sounds. Like the writer of 1 Peter, Paul addresses those who are ‘waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Corinthians 1.7).

In the interim, however, the early church had to wait and to endure, ‘knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience hope: And hope maketh not ashamed’ (Romans 5.3–5).¹⁹ This hope is ‘for that we seek not’ (Romans 8.24–5), and Paul

writes to the Colossians of ‘the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel’ (Colossians 1.5). For Paul, the four last things are mysteries hidden with God, and his teaching on the Christian hope speaks to the pilgrim church of the new covenant, going forward in confidence into ‘that we see not’. ‘Paradise’ was for him ‘now and not yet’.²⁰

In the New Testament the object of the Christian hope remains indefinite: outside the Book of Revelation there are no detailed descriptions of the future life. One explanation for the infrequency and generality of Jesus’s teaching on the subject in the gospels is that he took life after death for granted.²¹ His reported sayings on the four last things, his raising of Lazarus from the dead, and his teaching on the kingdom are in various ways difficult to interpret. The description of the last judgment in Matthew 25, for example, modifies Jewish apocalyptic by suggesting that groups of individuals rather than nations will be judged, and judged according to their works. But no reference is made to Christ’s redemptive act in dying upon the cross.²² The final verse of the chapter (‘And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into eternal life’), the subject of much heated debate in the nineteenth century, may have been a Matthean addition, recalling Daniel 12.2. The story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead poses more problems than it solves, as Tennyson knew:

Behold a man raised up by Christ!
 The rest remaineth unrevealed;
 He told it not; or something seal’d
 The lips of that Evangelist.²³

Most of Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom is conveyed through parables, a form in which the truths of the gospel are at once proclaimed, through accessible stories, and hidden, through concealed meanings available only to insiders.²⁴ Even the most direct teaching is suggestive rather than explanatory. In the farewell discourses in the fourth gospel, for example, words which have encouraged not only ecumenists but also those who look to the unification of all world faiths (‘In my Father’s house are many mansions’, 14.2) are followed by the unequivocal saying, ‘no man cometh unto the Father, but by me’ (14.6).

The Book of Revelation, on the other hand, presents difficulties of interpretation of a different order, for what James Hastings called ‘the “Divina Commedia” of Scripture’ can be read as all too literal a descrip-

tion of the events of the *eschaton*.²⁵ In the nineteenth century many believed that the seven seals and the four horsemen, the dragon, and the lake of brimstone were more than chiliastic symbols. At the end of the century, one theologian acknowledged the fact that the Revelation had ‘suffered many things from the strained ingenuity of the dogmatic interpreter’. He himself focused upon the *parousia*, the ‘objective, visible return’ of Christ, as the ‘decisive event of the future’ in his analysis of the book.²⁶ Northrop Frye, however, reminds us of the problems associated with an ‘objective’ reading: ‘The author speaks of setting down what he has seen in a vision, but the Book of Revelation is not a visualized book in the ordinary sense of the word, as any illustrator who has struggled with its seven-headed and ten-horned monsters will testify.’²⁷ Inspired by the Book of Revelation, many Victorian illustrators and painters, poets, novelists, and preachers attempted to combine sublimity with realism, the visionary with the matter-of-fact, in their portrayals of the last days.

In contrast to those who searched the New Testament for evidence of the location and dimensions of heaven, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the great Protestant theologian of the early nineteenth century, wrote on the subject of the future life:

all the indications [the Redeemer] gives are either purely figurative, or otherwise so indefinite in tenor that nothing can be gathered from them more than what for every Christian is so much the essential thing in every conception he may form of existence after death, that without it such existence would be mere perdition – namely, the persistent union of believers with the Redeemer.²⁸

The one statement of Jesus which may be said to summarize the gospel message also underlines the grounds of the Christian hope, but without offering Martha, the sister of Lazarus, a mental picture of the future life: ‘I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die’ (John 11.25–6).

The lively hope of resurrection in Jesus Christ was reflected in the new tone of early Christian funerary inscriptions in the Roman catacombs.²⁹ Meditating on these, Walter Pater’s *Marius* became ‘as by some gleam of foresight, aware of the whole force of evidence for a certain strange, new hope, defining in its turn some new and weighty motive of action, which lay in deaths so tragic for the “Christian superstition”’ (*Marius the Epicurean*, 1885; 21). Expressions of Christian hope often spring