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Attitudes towards death have changed dramatically over the centuries, not least because ideas about what happens after death have changed. The Victorians were not only obsessed with the subject of death, bereavement, and funeral rituals; they also speculated on the nature of heaven and hell, and argued about the related theme of divine judgment.

In this book Michael Wheeler looks at the literary implications of Victorian views of death and the life beyond, and the fear and hope embodied in the theological positions of the novelists and poets of the age. His analyses of each of the 'four last things' of Christian theology – death, judgment, heaven, and hell – and their part in nineteenth-century thought draw on a wide range of sermons, tracts, biographical writings, anthologies of sacred poetry, and popular 'guides to heaven' from 1830 to 1890, in addition to the more established canon of Victorian literary and theological writings. He shows that many nineteenth-century poets and preachers, novelists and Bible commentators are engaged in a shared act of interpretation in the face of death and bereavement, when language comes under great strain but can also draw upon traditional sources of consolation.

A revised and abridged version of Professor Wheeler's award-winning study of 1990, *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians* is a major exploration of a central dimension of Victorian life and thought.

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Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521455169

Originally published as *Death and the future life in Victorian literature and theology* by Cambridge University Press 1990 and
 © Cambridge University Press 1990

This abridged edition published 1994 and
 © Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

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A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Wheeler, Michael, 1947–
 [Death and the future life in Victorian literature and theology] Heaven,
 Hell, and the Victorians/Michael Wheeler.
 p. cm.
 Includes index.
 ISBN 0–521–45565–0 (paperback)
 1. English literature – 19th century – History and criticism.
 2. Death – Religious aspects – Christianity – History – 19th century.
 3. Theology, Doctrinal – Great Britain – History – 19th century.
 4. Future life – Christianity – History – 19th century. 5. Future life in literature.
 6. Heaven in literature. 7. Death in literature. 8. Hell in literature. I. Title.
 PR468.D42W4 1994
 820.9'354–dc20 94–787 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-45516-9 hardback
 ISBN-10 0-521-45516-2 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-45565-7 paperback
 ISBN-10 0-521-45565-0 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2005

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For Joshua, Charlotte, and Emily



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Preface

Heaven, Hell and the Victorians is a revised and abridged version of my earlier study entitled *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1990. Apart from alterations throughout the text designed to make certain literary and theological concepts more accessible to a wider readership, the main difference between the two books is that this new version omits the detailed studies of four literary texts that formed Part Two of the original. In a new Conclusion, however, I briefly discuss the relevance of some of the Victorian ideas and conventions associated with death, judgment, heaven, and hell to these four texts by Tennyson, Dickens, Newman, and Hopkins.

My work on this fascinating area began in the mid-1970s, during an investigation of the background to Dickens's use of apocalyptic biblical allusions. I found that nineteenth-century theological controversies concerning eternal punishment and the future life had been thoroughly investigated by Geoffrey Rowell, in his excellent book on *Hell and the Victorians* (1974). Surprisingly, however, no large-scale work on the literary implications of this crucial, but now somewhat inaccessible, area of Victorian thought and belief had been carried out. A long period of research followed, during which many sermons and tracts, biographies and reminiscences, anthologies of sacred poems for mourners and popular guides to heaven were examined, as well as the relevant canonical works of the period, both theological and literary.

As the work went on it became clear that a number of different books could have been written, each reflecting a particular aspect of, or approach to, this large area of interest. First, there was the possibility of emphasizing the social history of death, as John Morley does, for example, and relating this to both the theology and the literature of the period. Secondly, a more 'thanatological' study would have focused upon death and bereavement as rites of passage, taking the work of

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Victor Turner, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and Philippe Ariès as points of departure, and considering certain ideas and images of a future life as projections of the experience of those rites. Thirdly, it would have been feasible to carry out a comprehensive survey of all those ideas and images in the Victorian period, of the kind that Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang have since done more selectively in their history of heaven in the West. Would-be readers of all three unwritten books will, I hope, find some material of particular interest to them in the chapters that follow. I have concentrated, however, on re-examining the theological questions associated with death, judgment, heaven, and hell in the nineteenth century, and showing how these questions are reflected in the work of the creative writers.

It is perhaps a sign of our times that three leading literary critics have in recent years turned their attention to the relationship between literature and theology: Northrop Frye in *The Great Code*, Frank Kermode in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, and George Steiner in *After Babel*. The work of these three critics reflects something of the range of pressing and challenging topics which are of concern to both disciplines, including the study of language, narrative, and myth, and which are the subject of the journal *Literature & Theology*. I wish first to acknowledge my debt to the increasing number of scholars now working in the field of literature and theology, and particularly to my former colleagues on the journal – David Jasper, Terry Wright, Nicholas Sagovsky, Alison Milbank, John Milbank, and Mark Ledbetter.

Versions of sections of Chapter 1 have appeared in the form of conference papers published by the Macmillan Press Ltd, and edited by David Jasper and T. R. Wright: ‘Tennyson, Newman and the Question of Authority’, in *The Interpretation of Belief: Coleridge, Schleiermacher and Romanticism* (1986), and ‘“Can These Dry Bones Live?”: Questions of Belief in a Future Life’, in *The Critical Spirit and the Will to Believe: Essays in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Religion* (1989).

I am indebted to the following institutions: Lancaster University and its Humanities Research Committee, for granting funds for special research leave, 1986–7, and for a term’s study leave in 1989; the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, for awarding a Visiting Fellowship, Michaelmas 1986; and The British Academy, for awarding a research grant for that term. Also to the librarians and staffs of the British Library, London; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; Cambridge University Library; Edinburgh University

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Library; the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; Lancaster University Library; Lincolnshire Central Reference Library, Lincoln; the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; New College Library, Edinburgh; St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden; and Stonyhurst College Library. I would like to thank a number of individuals who have helped me with patience and kindness: A. S. Byatt; Arthur Sale; at Lancaster, John Andrews, Pat Armitage, Chip Coakley, Davina Chaplin, Keith Hanley, Vimala Herman, Carole Lord, Denis McCaldin, Alan Robinson, Patrick Sherry, and David Webb; at Edinburgh and St Andrews Universities, Michael Alexander, Ian Campbell, Evelyn Carruthers, Peter Jones, and Karl Guthke; and particularly Andrew Brown, David Carroll, Alison Milbank, and Christopher Walsh, whose continued support and enthusiasm have sustained me. Ruth Hutchison assisted with the revisions for this new version with characteristic skill. The dedicatees, and their mother, know how profoundly grateful I am to them, in so many ways.

MDW