

## LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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My guess is that all sorts of new problems confront the long-suffering cataloguer in theological and philosophical libraries these days; and the same must also be true in English Studies libraries. Indeed, the full title of my paper might have been, 'Literature and Theology: Researchers' Dream, Librarians' Nightmare'. Broadly speaking, the sea change which some have been pleased to call 'the crisis in English' has led to two major developments in the subject. First, 'literary theory', which draws upon philosophy, anthropology, linguistics and sociology, has moved from the margin towards the centre of the arena; and this is reflected in the introduction of new courses on methodology and theory in British universities. Secondly, many more scholars are now committed to the formal investigation of the relationship between their own and other disciplines. Colleagues in my own department, for example, are working in the areas of literature and the visual arts, literature and history (and specifically the history of science), and the multi-disciplinary subject of women's studies. In my view, this second development will, in the long term, prove to be even more significant than the first.

The academic discipline of English has, of course, always looked outwards to other disciplines. At Cambridge in the late 'sixties, Basil Willey's 'background' books were still essential reading; the 'moralists' paper was a fairly popular option; and undergraduates were expected to acquire a sound understanding of the intellectual and cultural context in which the literature of each period was written. English, however, and particularly Leavisite English, tended to be somewhat colonialist in its appropriation of material that could be called 'background' and thus be kept in its place. Indeed, Leavis' establishment of a secular canon of English literature seemed to fulfil Matthew Arnold's prophecy in the 1880s, that most of what then passed for religion and philosophy would be replaced by poetry (*The Study of Poetry*).

Today, however, there is a growing awareness among English specialists that many of the boundaries between academic disciplines are marks on maps rather than real topographical features; that students of texts, or narratives, or systems of signs, may be members of departments of English, modern languages, classics, linguistics, Middle Eastern studies, religious studies, philosophy, sociology, or visual arts; and that the

trained student of literature can learn much from, say, the biblical scholar, and vice-versa.

This last example brings me to my own area of special interest, and in order to provide a glimpse into some of the things that are going on in the field of literature and theology, I propose to say a little about a new English journal, of which I am one of three associate editors. I shall then go on to say something about my own work on Victorian literature and theology in relation to death and the future life.

The first issue of the journal *Literature and Theology* was published by Oxford University Press in March 1987.<sup>2</sup> Its editor is Dr. David Jasper, who has been joint secretary (with Dr. T.R. Wright) of the National Conference on Literature and Religion since its foundation in 1982 under the presidency of Dr. F.W. Dillistone. The third associate editor of the journal is Dr. Nicholas Sagovsky, with Dr. John Milbank and Mrs. Alison Milbank as review editors. The publication of the first issue of *Literature and Theology* marks the beginning of a new phase in the development of an increasingly significant interdisciplinary area, continuing in print the discussion of matters which have concerned the National Conference, including narrative, the intellectual and cultural context of writing, hermeneutics, the nature of myth, language and semiotics, and the art of translation.

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 - all of whom are on the journal's advisory editorial board - reflects something of the range of pressing and challenging topics which are of concern to both disciplines. That range is also reflected in the first three issues of *Literature and Theology*, which include articles by literary scholars and theologians on matters which are of interest and significance to both groups. But where, one asks, is the poor librarian to shelve the journal? And how, come to that, is *Literature and Theology* to be classified?

#### INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN PRACTICE

My own current research presents less of a problem, I hope, being classifiable as Eng. Lit., although much of the material analysed is theological. The idea for the study, which is eventually to be published by Cambridge University Press, evolved from the realization that although nineteenth-century theological controversies concerning eternal punishment and the future life had been thoroughly investigated by Dr. Geoffrey Rowell of Keble College Oxford, in his book, *Hell and the Victorians* (1974), no large-scale work on this crucial,

but now somewhat inaccessible area of Victorian thought and belief had been carried out in the literary field. A long course of reading followed, taking in large numbers of sermons and tracts, biographies and reminiscences, anthologies of sacred poems for mourners and popular guidebooks on heaven, as well as the relevant major works of the period, both theological and literary.

The book that has emerged is divided into two parts. Following an introduction on the grounds of hope in the Bible, and questions of doctrine, biblical authority, and religious language associated with that theme, I examine in Part One each of the 'four last things' (death, judgement, heaven and hell) in separate chapters, often drawing upon material which is unfamiliar today but was widely read in the nineteenth century. In Part Two, four further chapters are devoted to Dickens' novels, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius*, and Hopkins' *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, which are discussed in relation to the concepts, models and methodologies explored in Part One.

Eschatology was a highly controversial subject in the Victorian period, as a glance through any collection of religious tracts or indeed general periodicals will reveal. In the absence of definite and coherent teaching on judgement, 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 ideas of heaven as community and heaven as a place of worship proved difficult to reconcile. Some of the radical truth claims of the New Testament which had always seemed either enigmatic or contradictory now became questionable in the light of the Higher Criticism.

My argument is that in grappling with these themes and debates, theologians and creative writers were engaged in a collaborative effort which threw up profoundly significant questions concerning the nature of religious belief, experience, and language. Both preachers and poets, for example, confronted the problem of finding a discourse which could convey a sense of the transcendent in an increasingly scientific-materialist world. 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 England 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'. 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

speaking of that which is 'beyond words' or to narrate the unnarratable, such as the mysteries that are death and the future life, language comes under great pressure, and communication - in death-bed scenes, for example - can break down. It is in these critical moments of stress or fracture in the discourse of consolation that both the provisional nature of the writing project and the grounds of Christian faith are laid bare.

## BETWEEN WORLDS

At the centre of these concerns, I argue, lies a tension between what can broadly be defined as 'horizontal' models, which tend to be experiential and gradualist in orientation (stressing the continuity between life and death, for example), and 'vertical' models that are often theocentric, scriptural, and catastrophist. I discuss the processes of death and bereavement as rites of passage in Victorian death-bed and graveyard scenes, using Victor Turner's adaptation of Van Gennep's famous concept, and try to show how in the horizontal dimension, the dying person as 'passenger' passes from the fixed state that is life to the fixed state that is death (or the 'next world', depending on one's perspective), via an ambiguous 'liminal phase' that 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 death-bed 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. The burial service in the Book of Common Prayer, however, far from reinforcing these manageable stages of separation, consoled Victorian mourners (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 11 and I Corinthians 15, which speak of a resurrection that is, so to say, against nature: of life in death, of incorruption in corruption, of rising in descending. These horizontal and vertical dimensions often intersect in Victorian death-bed and graveyard scenes, and Henry Bowler's painting, *The Doubt: 'Can these dry bones live?'* (Tate Gallery) provides an excellent visual example of this. Such paradoxes and contraries are finally resolvable only through faith, and the ultimate Christian paradigm of the kind of intersection I am describing is, of course, the cross itself.

## HYMNS

It is in their hymns - the most enduring and widely familiar form of nineteenth century lyric verse to this day - that heaven is most

successfully conveyed by the Victorians as a 'vertical' spiritual reality rather than merely a 'horizontal' projection of earthly desires. Moreover, it is in their hymns - particularly in their liturgical use - that the literary and theological dimensions converge most naturally. Although an act of worship is diachronic, and thus 'horizontal' in the sense that it moves through time and presupposes a revelation that is historical, it is also synchronic, or 'vertical', in relation both to the divine reality and to the universal Church, each of which is in a different sense 'present'. This is reflected in the dominance of the present tense in liturgy, as in the words 'I believe in God', "give us this day our daily bread", and 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy Table'. Victorian hymns exploit both the diachronic and the synchronic potentialities of liturgical language in order to speak of heaven within the present of an act of worship. Heaven may be now, or not yet, or now and not yet. The continuities and discontinuities between this fleeting world and heaven are conveyed in the language of hymnody through special uses of tense and syntactic construction.

Within the dominant present tense of hymnody, what I call the 'eternal' present of heaven as an affirmed transcendental reality can be distinguished from both the 'liturgical' present in which the hymn is sung and the 'existential' present of a mortal lifespan (as opposed to a future post-mortem existence). It is perhaps fitting to end this paper with a brief examination of the hymn which was liked by Tennyson better than most: Bishop Heber's 'Holy, Holy, Holy', appointed for Trinity Sunday. Heber adapts passages from the Book of Revelation to his own purposes. Having put the words of the four living creatures in the mouth of the worshipper in the liturgical present of his first line, Heber suggests a promise of continued and regular earthly worship through the durative 'shall' in his second:

Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee!  
Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and Mighty!  
God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity!

Continuity between the liturgical and eternal present is established in the second verse:

Holy, Holy, Holy! all the Saints adore Thee,  
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;  
Cherubim and Seraphim falling down before Thee,  
Which wert, and art, and evermore shall be.

In the Revelation it is the elders who cast down their crowns, and the elders are differentiated from the transfigured saints and the angels. Heber's adaptation, however, strengthens the parallel between the earthly congregation and the heavenly host of the redeemed. The line 'Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea' is one of the

most vivid and memorable in nineteenth century hymnody, and one that epitomizes the sense of synchronic worship in heaven that is a feature of the period. The rhyming of the durative 'casting' and 'falling' reinforces the effect of the thrice repeated 'Holy, holy, holy', which is itself given temporal universality in the echoing triple structure of the line, 'Which wert, and art, and evermore shall be'. Verse 3 returns to the liturgical present, and in the final verse a universal song of praise to the Trinity broadens to a Benedicite offered on behalf of the threefold creation of 'earth, and sky, and sea':

Holy, Holy, Holy! though the darkness hide Thee,  
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see,  
Only Thou are Holy, there is none beside Thee  
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!  
All Thy works shall praise Thy Name, in earth, and sky, and sea;  
Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and Mighty!  
God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity!

I hope I have given some insight into some of the issues relating to the intersection between literature and theology. What remains for the theological librarian is perhaps the greater problem: how to cope with the needs that such interdisciplinary studies generate.

#### NOTES

1. This is an adapted version of a paper delivered at the ABTAPL Conference, Lancaster, Easter 1987.
2. For a review of this journal see ABTAPL *Bulletin* : No. 40, November, 1987.

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