

## CHAPTER 47

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# VISIONS OF HEAVEN AND HELL

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ELENA VOLKOVA

... in my flight  
Through utter and through middle darkness borne,  
With other notes than to the Orphean lyre  
I sung of Chaos and eternal Night;  
Taught by the heavenly Muse to venture down  
The dark descent, and up to re-ascend,  
Though hard and rare: Thee I revisit safe,  
And feel thy sovran vital lamp....

(Milton, *Paradise Lost*)

## THE DESCENT INTO HELL

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There was only one Temple dedicated to Hades in Greece, and it only opened one day per year, perhaps because it represented the fact that people only descended into the realm of the dead once in their lives. Only priests were allowed to enter the temple on the Day of Hades. Mortals would be punished severely for penetrating the underworld, as Theseus found to his cost when he attempted to kidnap Persephone, the wife of Hades. However, the myths relate that there were certain men who did obtain

permission to enter: Orpheus, the famed poet and musician, descended there in the hope of bringing back his wife Eurydice; Odysseus, hero of the Trojan War, breached the threshold of Hades while trying to find a way back home to his own land of Ithaca. But whereas the mellifluous Orpheus failed in his quest, the artful Odysseus reached his goal. Their contrasting outcomes may symbolize the fact that in the Greek religion there was no return to life, and that neither love nor art were able to conquer death: Odysseus succeeded only because he did not attempt resurrection. He only sought mystic knowledge that would enlighten him on his way home.

Thus in Greek mythology it is only the priest, the artist, and the hero—representing spirit, genius, and courage—who might approach or enter the world of the dead. The aim of their respective descents is to worship the god, to save people from death, and to return home.

In the Christian faith by contrast, God miraculously raises people from the dead and descends into hell after his own death on the cross. There he rescues the faithful and opens the door to heaven for them. This is the first thing Jesus Christ does after his crucifixion: he takes Adam and others out of the world of death and brings them to their heavenly home. The three mythological motifs surrounding the descent into the underworld remain however—worshipping God, saving the dead, and returning home: God the Son does the will of his Father, saves humanity from evil, and translates the faithful out of hell and into their heavenly home.

E. M. W. Tillyard in his book *Some Mythical Elements in English Literature* (1961) describes a window in King's College Chapel, dating from about 1530, which

shows the first act of Christ after his death on the cross: that of leaving his body in the tomb, breaking Hell's gates, and haling out Adam, Eve and other patriarchs for transference to their new home in Paradise. This act was known as the harrowing or subduing of Hell. The King's chapel window, in point of treatment, is normally representative of the differing versions of this not entirely canonical series of acts; aesthetically it is one of the most eminent. (ibid. 20).

Alister E. McGrath (2003: 92) mentions a fifteenth-century English alabaster panel, which depicts Christ as Harrower of Hell. The story of Christ's descent into hell derives from scattered passages of Scripture (analysed in detail in John Pearson's *An Exposition of the Creed*, 1659), but in fact cannot be attested by the Bible (though there are hints in 1 Peter) for it comes from the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Nevertheless the story was very popular in both the Byzantine and the Western artistic tradition and became part of the Apostles' Creed. Tillyard thinks that the reason for the story's popularity lies in the medieval desire to fulfil Scripture in its account of Adam's fall and to persuade 'the ears of illiterate' that it is the church as Body of Christ that can guarantee them salvation:

As to establishing connections, the concrete rescue of Adam by Christ corresponded precisely with the perdition of Adam by Satan through the concrete act of eating the forbidden fruit. [...] If the doctrine of Redemption could be put in terms of Adam it would penetrate the simple man's mind more quickly and surely than through any other means. Looking at a mosaic or a fresco of Christ taking Adam by the hand, he could reflect: There I am; or there I could be, if I followed the commands of the Church. (Tillyard 1961: 27–8)

Medieval writers often show first-hand knowledge of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. All four mystery cycles (York, Chester, Wakefield, and Coventry), the fourteenth-century drama *The Harrowing of Hell*, as well as the poems *Northern Passion* and *Cursor Mundi*, include versions of the Harrowing of Hell as if it were canonical. Langland combines the myth with that of the Four Daughters of God (Pity, Truth, Justice, Peace).

In early Christian art Orpheus was identified with Christ; the image of the legendary artist was seen as analogy for 'the good shepherd', because of his descent into Hades to save his wife. In this respect, the Descent into Hell, or the Harrowing of Hell, is archetypal and may refer to the calling of any writer, and even to the religious understanding of literature in general: every artist *descends* into the 'hell' of human life, in the sense that he has to engage with the realm of sin and suffering, crime and punishment, darkness and despair to save people either from their blindness, negligence, despair, or desolation.

Literature tends to represent human life, the world in which we live and which we are called to transform, as a metaphor of hell. Any work of literature that deals with conflict, pain, suffering, grief, misery, and disaster (and which does not, at least indirectly?) bears an analogy to hell, where life lacks love, bliss, and harmony. Aristotle's definition of the perfect tragic plot as one in which we note a 'change in the hero's fortunes [...] from happiness to misery', or Northrop Frye's identification of *Paradise Lost* as an archetypal plot convention, may prove the point. This earthly 'hell' may be presented as a social environment (in George Orwell's *1984*, J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, William Golding's *Darkness Visible*, and many others, particularly in dystopia, war, and Holocaust literature), like a gloomy city ('Hell is a city much like London' in the words of Shelley's *Peter Bell*) or as a symbolic Waste Land inhabited by Hollow Men in T. S. Eliot's poetry. It also refers to an inward state: Satan cries 'Myself is Hell' in *Paradise Lost*, and he is echoed in T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*: 'What is Hell? Hell is oneself.'

Christ descends into hell led by his compassionate love towards those who suffer there. In the last quatrain of the York version of the *Harrowing of Hell* Adam says:

To the, Lorde, be louyng  
That us has wonne fro waa;  
For solas will we syng,  
Laus tibi cum gloria.

(To Thee, Lord, be praise, who has won us from woe; for solace we will sing, Praise to thee with glory.)

Langland explains that Christ went to Hell 'to learn what all woe is'; Blake, who identifies God with the Poetic Genius, echoes: 'Can I see another's woe, | And not be in sorrow too?' ('On Another's Sorrow'). It is then being in sorrow with the fallen world that makes the Poetic Genius descend into hell, reconsider, and recreate it. That is why, perhaps, the Poet is 'of the devil's own party', as Blake writes of Milton: hell is the realm *he* has to descend into and to deal with. Joyce Carol Oates (1976: 7) believes,

that the serious artist insists upon the sanctity of the world—even the despairing artist insists upon the power of *his* art somehow to transform what is given. It may be that his role, his

function, is to articulate the very worst, to force up into conscience the most perverse and terrifying possibilities of the epoch, so that they can be dealt with and not simply feared; such artists are often denounced as vicious and disgusting when in fact they are—sometimes quite apart from their individual conception of themselves—in the service of their epoch, attempting to locate images, adequate to the unshaped, unconscious horrors they sense.

## ANTINOMY OF FALLING/RISING

Thomas Green, in his *The Descent from Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity* makes the story of the descent a major element of the epic and sees descending as an intrinsic part of the ascending process. Together they create a complex religious duality in the text. Green (1963: 390) develops this idea by analysing the *vertical imagery* in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: '*Paradise Lost* plays continually with the paradoxical duality of lowness—the lowness of humility and of moral degradation or despair—and with the duality of height—of spiritual eminence of exaltation and of pride. It plays also with the paradoxes of rising and falling, the abasement that exalts and the pride that abases'.

The falling–rising paradox, he continues, is a biblical commonplace, referring to the prophesies of Isa. 40: 4 ('Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low'), and of Christ in Matt. 23: 12 ('Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted'), and to many other passages,<sup>1</sup> as well as in English poetry: Vaughan's 'The Morning Watch' ('O let me climb when I lye down'); Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* ('I am readier to fall to the earth, now I am up, than I was when I lay in bed . . . Even rising is the way to ruin!'; 'Now I am up, I am ready to sink lower than before').

Northrop Frye, in his *Words With Power* (1990), regards the coherence of the Bible's narrative to lie in its 'U-Shaped plot'. It begins in the garden in paradise, is followed by the fall, and concludes with the final triumph of ascent to the Celestial City of the New Jerusalem. This plotline may be found on a biographical level in the many biblical stories of fall and rise, such as those of Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Job, David, Peter, and Paul, as well as framing a wide range of literary narratives.

Thus we can suggest that when a writer tries to 'articulate the very worst, to force up into conscience the most perverse and terrifying possibilities of the epoch' he does not necessarily experience the fall himself, but rather makes the imaginative descent in order to elevate his readers' minds.

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. 21: 26; 31: 10–18; 1 Peter 5: 5–6; Job 24: 24; Matt. 11–23; Luke 14: 11; 18: 14; Jas. 1: 9–10; Eph. 4: 9–10; Phil. 2: 5–10 (Green 1963: 388–9).

## THE DESCENT OF HEAVEN TO EARTH

Where does the artist *descend* from? Barring the idea of a literal descent from life on a mountaintop (as in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*), there must be some vertical dimension in his or her life, some height within that furnishes him or her with the perspective to see the distortion of human life. And from what is it distorted? On what step of Jacob's ladder, which unites heaven and earth, does this or that artist stand, if he or she sees humanity as 'crashing down all the steps of this Jacob's ladder that reached from paradise to a hell on earth'? (as Bernard Shaw writes in *Back to Methuselah*). What is his heaven like?

Robert Herrick sees it as some *whiter Island*:

In this world (the *Isle of Dreames*)  
While we sit by sorrowes streams,  
Tears and terrors are our themes,  
Reciting:

In that *whiter Island*, where  
Things are evermore sincere;  
Candor here, and lustre there  
Delighting:

(*The white Island: or  
place of the Blest*)

For most medieval writers (the authors of the Middle Irish *Vision of Adomnán* (Fis Adomnan), the Middle English *Pearl* and *Doomsday*; *Vision of the Monk of Eynsha*, and *The Vision of Tundale*) the ideal of perfection is that presented in the Bible, where heaven is a transcendent other world, an abode of God, angels, and saints, revealed in visions to Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and John.

Heaven may be used as a synonym for paradise, or the Garden of Eden. There are three types of paradise in the Bible: the first, the natural terrestrial one, is planted by God on earth for human habitation (Gen. 2: 8,10; 4: 16). It is not in heaven, but since it is the place where people can see God face to face and live in peace with him, it may be seen to partake of the Heavenly Kingdom. There is no spiritual difference between heaven and earth in the beginning: God creates both as parts of a new universe. The second appears only after Adam and Eve have been expelled from paradise. For a time, there is no Eden, but Christ's crucifixion opens the door to a celestial paradise. Finally, heaven is also represented mystically in the form of sacred or secular visions, in revelations or dreams. A personal 'dream' displays the author's meekness, and his or her lack of control over the dream. It is authorized by the One who gives it, and confirmed by those capable of interpreting.

The Revelation of St John the Divine is a major source of medieval literary visions. The author of the last book of the Bible sees a new heaven and a new earth united—God's eternal Kingdom is revealed to him as

the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people,

and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. (Rev. 21: 2–4)

Biblical visions provide literature with the basic archetypes of heaven—those of the kingdom (up *there*), the garden (down *here*) and the city (descending from *there* to *here*). All of them also function as metonyms of God who dwells *there* in heaven, *here* in the earthly paradise, and descends twice—from heaven to earth, and from earth into hell.

The terrestrial and celestial paradises symbolically represent some kind of inner paradise—‘the Kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17: 21). Joseph Duncan’s *Milton’s Earthly Paradise: A Historical Study of Eden* analyses the tripartite interrelations between the natural, celestial and inner paradise in Milton:

Both the inner paradise of edenic innocence and the allegorical garden of virtues are lost, but the inner paradise of the regenerate may be gained and possessed in a fallen world. This paradise of inner grace, like the external, natural paradise, is created by God. Like the celestial paradise, it is foreshadowed and suggested by the loveliness of the natural paradise. In *Paradise Lost*, when Adam goes forth into the world, he possesses the paradise within, ‘happier farr’ than the external paradise he is leaving. [...] The inner paradise of innocence and the external paradise fuse to form a complex symbol of a spiritual state; and the inner life of Satan and the devils fuses with the external features of Hell to form a comparable symbol. (Duncan 1972: 264, 266)

Milton’s Satan tries to persuade himself that ‘The mind is its own place, and in itself | Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven’ (1. 254–5) (the idiom is borrowed from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*).

Another biblical source of heaven symbolism is Jesus’s parables, where the Kingdom of Heaven is presented by symbolic things (‘treasures in heaven’ as opposed to ‘treasures on earth’, a ‘pearl of great price’, ‘a grain of mustard seed’, leaven) and people (a merchant seeking for pearls, a king who arranged a marriage for his son, a man who gives talents to his servants, ten virgins with lamps who go out to meet the bridegroom, a landowner who hired labourers for his vineyard). If the parable relates to man then he symbolizes either God himself (usually as king or master, who chooses the righteous for the kingdom), or the desire of the soul for heavenly riches. So they speak of the kingdom of heaven as both an objective domain of God and a state of one’s mind.

*Pearl*, a fourteenth-century poem ‘contains what is arguably the finest account of the New Jerusalem to have been written in the English language’ (McGrath 2003: 25). It is a wonderful example of a dream vision, in which the biblical reference to a pearl—itself a symbol of the Heavenly Kingdom—is incorporated into the particular story of a jeweller who lost a most precious pearl. He speaks of it both as a jewel and as a human being, probably a 2-year-old daughter. The image is developed through the story: from a material thing—up to the heavenly Pearl Maiden, a guide to the celestial city that symbolizes Christ, his triumphant love, mercy, and grace. The dreamer is allowed to see the procession of Christ the Lamb and virgins, his brides in New Jerusalem, all of whom are crowned as queens of the kingdom. The Pearl Maiden may be understood to represent the jeweller’s late daughter, or her soul, that reigns in heaven. *Pearl* actually offers an archetype of sorts for subsequent visions of

heaven as it has many motifs that will be developed: that of paradise lost, since on a literal level the jeweller lost what he valued most on earth, but on a spiritual level he also lost his inner paradise (an aspect which will attain primary significance in Romanticism); it contains a reunion with the departed (which will be a leitmotif in the Victorian treatment of heaven); and it contains a pilgrimage story as an allegory of life (which will attain prominence in Chaucer and Bunyan).

In biblical and medieval visions heaven reveals itself to man as if a window were opened and symbols descended through it from God to earth, or as if God himself opened a door into the soul to reveal the essence of the Christian faith. Man, as the jeweller in *Pearl*, is given a lesson in perfection which he is supposed to learn in order to realize his own sins, repent, and change his life. This is very much the way heaven is opened to the biblical prophets: unexpectedly, as a gift sent by God from above (the *Apocalypse* is said to be 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which *God gave* [ . . . ] unto his servant John'). The King of Heaven speaks to his servants, or sends a messenger to his people for them to know what they should be or live like. Messengers and guides appear as angels in the Bible and in Milton; in the form of Virgil and Beatrice—in Dante; in the form of the Maiden—in *Pearl*; in the form of Solid People—in Lewis's *Great Divorce*, etc. A seer is a spectator in the heavenly theatre, who is supposed to enjoy the scene or the speech and draw a moral from them. Although *Pearl* is usually identified as an elegy, it may also derive from the sermon tradition, in so far as the Pearl Maiden preaches to the jeweller as a priest would amongst a community of believers, who seem to know the Scriptures but do not live accordingly.

Colleen McDannel and Bernard Lang in their *Heaven: A History* (1988) designate the medieval visions as theocentric and distinguish them from the anthropocentric ones which, they observe, begin with the focus on the human afterlife in the works of Swedenborg. A theocentric vision is an encounter with an otherwise invisible world, which *descends* to man in the moment it becomes visible, in the same way Christ descended to earth when he took on human flesh, or in the way it is revealed that the New Jerusalem will descend in the book of Revelation. In this sense visibility and verbalization, seen from a Christian perspective, are in themselves embodiments of the divine into images which may be associated with the incarnation of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the descent of heaven, or from heaven, is intrinsic to the religious nature of theocentric literature and art.

Incarnation for its part is theologically considered as the *kenosis* of Christ, 'emptying himself' of his divine prerogatives and subjecting himself to the laws of human birth and the lowliness of fallen human nature:

O Thou who camest from above,  
the pure celestial fire to impart  
kindle a flame of sacred love  
upon the mean altar of my heart.

(Charles Wesley, 1776)

<sup>2</sup> John of Damascus while defending icons against Iconoclasts in the eighth century, referred to incarnation: 'Of old God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was not depicted at all. But now that God has appeared in the flesh and lived among humans, I make an image of the God who can be seen.'

Many hymns maintain the theocentric focus of beatific visions: this idea of the church is based on the image of the New Jerusalem, the city where heaven and earth (as church visible and invisible) are united and inhabited by the community of the righteous, who participate in the heavenly liturgy, singing praise to God together with the angels and the saints:

That undisturbed Song of pure content,  
 Ay sung before the saphire-colour'd throne  
 To him that sits thereon  
 With Sainly shout, and solemn Jubily

(Milton, *At A Solemn Music*)

While John Milton believed that such harmony was only possible in the prelapsarian world, he anticipated that it would soon be restored:

O may we soon again renew that Song,  
 And keep in tune with Heav'n, till God ere long  
 To his celestial consort us unite,  
 To live with him, and sing in endles morn of light.

## THE IMAGINATIVE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

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We can note an increasing anthropocentric tendency in Renaissance literature, which introduces a new, active type of a visionary—an artist or narrator who creates an idea or picture of the transcendent by his own intellect and imagination. In Spenser's *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* and *An Hymne of Heavenly Beauty* the poet tries to lift his mind with the help of the divine love and beauty so as to reach heaven and enjoy the vision of it:

Loue, lift me vp vpon thy golden wings,  
 From this base world vnto thy heauens hight,  
 Where I may see those admirable things,  
 Which there thou workest by thy soueraine might,  
 Farre about feeble reach of earthly sight

(*An Hymne of Heavenly Love*)

Man is incapable of comprehending heaven; nor can his language verbalize it:

I faine to tell the things that I behold,  
 But feele my wits to faile, and tong to fold.

(*An Hymne of Heavenly Beauty*)

Spenser gives a Neoplatonic picture of Heaven, where 'those *Idees* on hie, | En-raunged be, which Plato so admired, | And pure *Intelligences* from God inspired.' His



heaven is hierarchal: Plato's ideas are part of the lowest level, 'where happy souls haue place', but higher and fairer are the heavens where a hierarchy of angels, *Powers*, *Potentates*, *Dominions*, *Cherubim*, and *Seraphim* preside (the ordering of these into three hierarchies in nine choirs Spenser borrows from the angelology of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c. AD 500). Spenser's heaven is 'the eternal fountaine' of perfect love, beauty, truth, wisdom, bliss, grace, mercy, and might. But it is love and beauty that he glorifies first, which reign in human hearts as dim reflections of God.

The anthropocentric tendency is far stronger in Milton's poetry. *Lycidas* was composed on the occasion of the death of fellow Cambridge student Edward King, who drowned when his ship sank off the coast of Wales in August 1637. Milton employs his favourite falling-rising antinomy: 'So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high'. Unlike the Pearl Poet, Milton does not need a divine sign to be certain that his *learned Friend* went up to heaven, and his emphasis remains upon the man. He does not rise to worship or serve God, and we are told that saints will 'entertain him' and 'wipe the tears for ever from his eyes'. In his poem *On Time*, Milton, developing the mythological image of the all-devouring Chronos, pronounces his certainty that all heavenly guided souls will dwell in heaven:

Then long Eternity shall greet our bliss  
With an individual kiss;

. . . . .  
Attir'd with Stars, we shall for ever sit,  
Triumphing over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time.

Having dominated in medieval and, to a lesser extent, Renaissance literature, there is a decided shift away from the biblical cosmology of earth in relation to heaven and hell for planetary mysticism in the metaphysical poets. In Crashaw's *Hymn to Sainte Teresa*, the moon, surrounded by maiden stars (supposedly representing St Mary and other virgins) has prepared room for St Teresa; the heavens, 'thy old friends', greet the saint 'and all in one weave a constellation | Of CROWNS, with which the King thy spouse, | shall build up thy triumphant browes'. Donne's *The Second Anniversary*, written on 'the religious death of Mistress Elizabeth Drury', abounds in planetary (esoteric?) imagery: the soul liberated by death from her 'living tomb' passes through many heavenly bodies: Hesper, Vesper, Mercury, Mars, the Sun, and finally reaches heaven. Astronomy and a new form of mysticism provide poetry with a new idea of the universe. As a result, the heaven of metaphysics gives a combination of biblical, classical, astrological images and scientific terms. To the bliss, love, holiness, worship, and other traditional associations of heaven Donne adds the knowledge which it implies and which can be obtained in its fullness only after death: 'In heaven thou straight know'st all, concerning it.'

The poetical rhythm and style tend to be lighter and more natural than in the Renaissance in spite of the metaphysical complexity of the message as, for example, in Herbert's poem 'Heaven', which is written in the form of a dialogue between the poet and echo about heaven:

Then tell me what is that supreme delight?  
*Echo.* *Light.*  
 Light to the mind: what shall the will enjoy?  
*Echo.* *Joy.*  
 But are there cares and business with the pleasure?  
*Echo.* *Leisure.*  
 Light, joy and leisure; but shall they persevere?  
*Echo.* *Ever.*

Each answer of the echo returns part of the last word in the question. The device is symbolic: it suggests that the essence of heaven is hidden in human language and may be derived from the similitude of words by means of rhyming, where the first rhyme-fellow (in the question of man) gives an earthly understanding of heaven, while the second one (that of the echo) reveals the mystery of heaven, which may be found either in the stem (the core of the word), as in *delight-light*, *enjoy-joy*, or through the consonance. Echo as a voice of heaven refers to the metaphysical understanding of rhyme as a device that reveals the hidden correspondence between things, which could help man comprehend the world as part of the spiritual universe, which wholeness and grandeur embraces all the divisions within it, where heaven and hell are parts of the global divine Providence, filled with the profound sense. The central symbol of echo also speaks of the growing anthropocentrism: heaven here is just a reflection of a Narcissus-like man.

This new metaphysical mode may be identified as microcosmic, for it is based on the idea of the human soul as a finite inner universe corresponding to the macrocosm of infinite existence. John Donne, in his *Second Anniversary*, writes that the heroine was 'to herself a State', 'a Church', and 'made this world in some proportion | A heaven'. Not only did she have a vast knowledge of heaven, she carried it within her soul and established it around her. Donne suggests that such souls, being a church unto themselves, can unite heaven and earth through their deeds and death:

So by the soul doth death string heaven and earth;  
 For when our soul enjoys this her third birth,  
 (Creation gave her one, a second, grace),  
 Heaven is as near, and present to her face,  
 As colours are, and objects, in a room  
 Where darkness was before, when tapers come.

In Traherne's 'Felicity', Dame Nature (playing the angelic role of messenger) reveals the infiniteness of the inner world to the poet: 'Dame Nature told me there was endless Space | Within my Soul, I spy'd its very face: | Sure it not for nought appears. | What is there which a Man may see | Beyond the Spheres?—FELICITY.'

Alistair McGrath (2003: 116) in his *A Brief History of Heaven* observes that

taking delight in nature is [...] seen as nourishing our anticipation of beholding God face to face—of satisfying the desire that owes its origins to God, and can only be fulfilled by God. Paradoxically, nature generates a longing that it cannot itself satisfy, and thus leads us to find God and heaven. While this theme is developed by many theologians, perhaps its most

systematic application is found in Romanticism and New England Transcendentalism. It is also a significant element in the writings of the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century.

The most influential literary depiction of natural paradise may be found in Milton's epic. But the natural world is also praised as Edenic in the poetry of Thomas Traherne, William Cowper, William Blake, and, in the most sublime and detailed way, by William Wordsworth in *The Excursion* and *The Prelude* ("That paradise, the lost abode of man, | Was raised again: and to a happy few, | In its original beauty, here restored" (IX 717–19).) While amongst the metaphysical and Romantic poets 'the kiss of Eternity' (to paraphrase Milton) became more individual and more hylozoic in nature, the Protestant religious literature of the seventeenth century returned to the biblical images of heaven.

## LIFE AS PILGRIMAGE: THE ROAD TO HEAVEN THROUGH HELL

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The vision of heaven is often linked to the pilgrimage story as a way up to the Kingdom of God. Forrest Smith, in his *Secular and Sacred Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages*, observes that

imaginary journeys into the afterlife [...] flourished in the medieval imagination as an interpretation of the primary, essential spiritual pilgrimage of man. The otherworld journey had as its counterpart in the secular world a search for perfection in this life as the terrestrial City of God. The journey took on the weight of myth, and for the late Middle Ages it was a plastic, unifying myth of Christian experience. [...] Visions in whatever form stand uniquely as an intersection of the eternal and the temporal and the divine and the human. (Smith 1986: 5, 7)

The most widely read English pilgrimage story was written by John Bunyan (1626–88). His *Pilgrim's Progress* presents scenes and characters that embody virtues and sins which may be understood to partake of heaven or hell. Christian and Evangelist (those who know and follow the Word of God), Goodwill, Interpreter (of the Bible), Patience, Discretion, Prudence, Piety, Charity, Hopeful, and Faithful certainly 'stand for the world to come'. With the help of them the pilgrim succeeds in the 'harrowing of hell', represented by the appearance of the characters Obstinate, Pliable, Worldly-Wiseman, Morality, Civility, Discontent, Shame, Ignorance, and other sinners, as well as by Apollyon, Beelzebub, and Legion, who are of infernal origin and construct a Vanity Fair on earth (according to a 'hell on earth' archetype) as a trap for the pilgrims to the Celestial City. All the characters are allegories of the proper and the improper, of true and false understandings of Christianity. Heaven in Bunyan has obvious allusions to the vision in Revelation: 'The city shone like the sun, the streets were paved with gold, and in the streets walked many people with crowns on their heads. They had palms in their hands, and carried golden harps with which

to sing praises. Some had wings, and they spoke to one another saying, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord!" Having approached paradise each pilgrim has to show a certificate to Enoch, Moses, and Elijah at the gate of the city to prove that he had passed all the way from the City of Destruction up to Heaven, which signifies the fullness of the spiritual battle one has fought. Bunyan's hero Christian is a warrior, who fights a spiritual war against sins and the enemies of God.

## WAR IN HEAVEN

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Milton also sees heaven through the lens of war. He places an unusual emphasis on the wrath of Jesus Christ, emphasizing his metaphoric status as the Lion of Judah rather than as the meek Lamb, particularly in the scene in which he drives a chariot against Satan's troops:

So spake the Son, and into terrour changed  
His countenance too severe to be beheld,  
And full of wrath bent on his enemies.

Most critics believe that in the episode of the War in Heaven Milton sought to imitate the epic poetry of Homer, Virgil, Hesiod, Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser, and other poets. The Battle of the Angels abounds in epic allusions. But A. C. Dobbin in *Milton and the Book of Revelation: The Heavenly Cycle* (1975) has convincingly argued that the allusions and devices Milton used were not merely nods towards epic conventions: 'Milton's account of the War in Heaven is based upon a literal interpretation of Revelation 12: 7-9 and Revelation 6: 1-8' (ibid. 29).

J. R. Watson writes that sanctified by the authority of the Bible, the ideas of the Holy War and the spiritual inner war between good and evil may be found in the legends of medieval Christianity, in the Counter-Reformation ideology of the Jesuits, in Bunyan, Milton, John and Charles Wesley, and many other writers. In the seventeenth century 'the Great Rebellion, or the Civil War, produced a literature of conflict and of warfare applied to the spiritual state', while later we can even see 'the transition of the defensive mode to an offensive one in the fighting hymns of the 19th century' (Watson 1999: 13, 18, 22). Both Milton and Bunyan made their faith part of their politics. The ideological mentality of Bunyan, for example, seems not to know any Christian love for the enemy, or any compassion for those going to hell.

Milton's hell could be interpreted as a metaphor for a human society that has rebelled against God, gripped by fear and despair, which they try to dispel by different activities, such as sport, military training ('As at th' Olympian games or Pythian fields'), art ('Retreated in a silent valley, sing'), theology, philosophy ('Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy!'), travelling ('to discover wide | That dismal world').

## THE THEODICY OF HEAVEN AND HELL

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The seventeenth century is marked by a drastic reconsideration of the idea of hell. D. P. Walker in *The Decline of Hell* states that the doctrine of hell remained almost unchallenged for many centuries<sup>3</sup> because of the very strong scriptural authority until it began to lose its hold in the seventeenth century in the writings of the Cambridge Platonists Peter Sterry and Jeremiah White and in the visions of some Philadelphians—Jane Lead, the Petersens, and Richard Roach. ‘An abominable aspect of the traditional doctrine of hell’, Walker writes, ‘was that the part of the happiness of the blessed consists in contemplating the torments of the damned. This sight gives them joy because it is a manifestation of God’s justice and hatred of sin, but chiefly because it provides a contrast which heightens their awareness of their own bliss’ (Walker 1963: 29). F. W. Farrar called this type of enjoyment ‘an abominable fancy’ and opposed the title of his own book *Eternal Hope* (1878) to the idea of eternal torments in hell.

Lindsey Hall in his *Swinburne’s Hell and Hick’s Universalism* suggests that there are various theological perspectives on hell: a strong view of hell (‘which is the belief that God sends those who will not be saved to hell’); a weak view of hell (‘God does not send people to hell, rather than they send themselves there’); the idea of annihilation and conditional immortality (‘the unrighteous will cease to exist after death’); and universalism (‘belief in universal salvation or apokatastasis’) (Hall 2003: 10–17).

In the seventeenth century the traditional doctrine of eternal torments in hell raises a question of theodicy: can heaven coexist with hell? What kind of paradise might it be when the rest of humanity suffer in hell? Can the faith based on fear of punishment have any moral value? As Thomas Burnet ironically puts it:

Consider a little, if you please, unmerciful Doctor, what a theatre of Providence this is: by far the greatest part of the human race burning in the flames for ever and ever. Oh what a spectacle on the stage, worthy of an audience of God and angels! And then to delight the ears, while this unhappy crowd fills heaven and earth with wailing and howling, you have a truly divine harmony. (Walker 1963: 32)

The majority of the early Church Fathers assume hell literally to be a place of fiery torments, of darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. Chaucer’s Parson vividly depicts ‘the horrible peynes of helle’ giving a lot of references to patristic and medieval understanding of the subject. In James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* we can find a parody on the traditional naturalistic description of hell, inspired, as it seems, by the sermons and books of the infamous nineteenth-century Irish-English priest Fr. Furniss, whose surname speaks of his love of preaching eternal damnation to little children in terrible hair-raising details. Dan Kelly opens his

<sup>3</sup> It was as early as the third century when Origen developed the idea of the ultimate salvation for everyone and was condemned as heretic. Similar ideas were expressed by Gregory of Nyssa and Isaac of Nineveh, and later revived in the ninth century by Scotus Erigena.

sarcastic article 'Book Hell!' with a highly expressive quotation from Fr. Furniss's *The Sight of Hell*:

Perhaps at this moment, seven o'clock in the evening, a child is just going into Hell. Tomorrow evening at seven o'clock, go and knock at the gates of Hell, and ask what the child is doing. The devils will go and look. Then they will come back again and say, the child is burning! Go in a week and ask what the child is doing; you will get the same answer—it is burning! Go in a year and ask; the same answer comes—it is burning! Go in a million of years and ask the same question; the answer is just the same—it is burning! So, if you go for ever and ever, you will always get the same answer—it is burning in the fire! (Kelly 2002).

Steven Daedalus' priest Fr. Arnall preaches in Fr. Furniss's manner:

Imagine some foul and putrid corpse that has lain rotting and decomposing in the grave, a jelly-like mass of liquid corruption. Imagine such a corpse a prey to flames, devoured by the fire of burning brimstone and giving off dense choking fumes of nauseous loathsome decomposition. And then imagine this sickening stench, multiplied a millionfold and a millionfold again from the millions upon millions of fetid carcasses massed together in the reeking darkness, a huge and rotting human fungus. Imagine all this, and you will have some idea of the horror of the stench of Hell.

As Geoffrey Rowell shows in his *Hell and the Victorians* the doctrine of everlasting punishment was one of the central points of debate for the greater part of the nineteenth century. 'The Bible, after several decades of controversy and criticism, no longer occupied the position of unquestionable authority which it had once held, and even where men were still concerned to profess a biblical religion, there had been too much discussion of the texts concerning eternal punishment for them to be altogether unaware of the difficulties surrounding their interpretation' (Rowell 1974: 2).

## MARRIED AND DIVORCED

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William Blake in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* includes the doctrine of eternal torments among the list of the major Errors made by 'all Bibles and sacred codes'. Yet this is probably because Blake followed Swedenborg in naturalizing the supernatural, both heaven and hell, as imaginative projections. The narrator literally descends into 'hell': 'As I was walking among the fires of Hell delighted with the enjoyment of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some Proverbs; thinking as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the Proverbs of hell show the nature of Infernal wisdom better than any descriptions of buildings or garments.' Blake treats hell with the respect Christians traditionally pay to heaven and he looks for infernal wisdom instead of longing for the heavenly one. Blake's Hell is an ironic image of what the church has done to the idea of the human and the divine: both have been divided into two antagonistic counterparts (soul and body/heaven

and hell) while man and world, both microcosm and macrocosm, are inseparable within them and driven by Energy, which is the source of the Poetic Genius.

The descent into hell (both as a place and a state of mind) is a very important Romantic motif, because the Romantics placed special emphasis on evil and its power over human hearts. The tradition started in the Gothic novel and was developed by S. T. Coleridge, P. B. Shelley, Lord Byron, E. A. Poe and other writers. The beatific imagery in Romantic poetry is often fused with infernal features: Byron's Cain *ascends* to the realm of Lucifer as a world of powerful knowledge; Coleridge's enchanting vision of Kubla Khan as an Edenic place is 'haunted | By a woman wailing for her demon-lover'; his Ancient Mariner suddenly descends from a happy state of mind ('Happily did we drop...'; 'Hailed it in God's name') into the infernal realm of crime and punishment (a dead, cursed world with death-fires, witch's oils, drought, a lack of speech, the hatred of the dead but moving shipmates, the dead Albatross hanging around the Mariner's neck instead of the cross, the rotting sea, the lonely soul in agony), and finally through repentance and love restores inner joy and peace.

In his *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, Blake opposes the world of innocent paradise to that of conceptual evil which brings hell into human hearts and lives. But 'the fearful symmetry' (to use the title of Northrop Frye's book on Blake, adopted from Blake's *The Tyger*) of Blake's *Marriage* is so controversial that scholars tend to look for sources in other texts: mostly in Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, in Boehme's *The Threefold Life of Man*, and Shakespeare (Nurmi 1957; Sabri-Tabrizi 1973). As for the 'harrowing of hell' motif, Blake establishes the priority of the active over the passive, includes the 'hell' of religious mistakes, and shows how people have made infernal things of heavenly ones. His active 'harrowing' of the traditional idea of hell is caused by his belief in the divine nature of the Poetic Genius: 'For Blake, Paradise was the human imagination, and he spent most of his time there. He not only believed in it firmly, but he acted on it unhesitatingly and consistently. His greatest achievement in his poetry and his design is "to carry us with him into such an imaginative world,"' states G. E. Bentley, who sees Blake as *The Stranger from Paradise* (Bentley 1999: 93-4).

Two of the famous Inklings circle, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, challenged both of Blake's Romantic ideas—his marriage of heaven and hell and his cult of genius. Lewis separates what Blake had put together in *The Great Divorce*: in his tale, people arrive on the threshold of paradise but cannot enter it. Ultimately they reject heaven and return to hell because they have nothing of paradise within them: they are filled with self-centredness, ambition, and vanity, all of which are alien to the realm of God's love and self-sacrifice. Lewis's allegory may serve as an illustration of Cardinal Newman's idea that heaven 'would be Hell to an irreligious man', because in heaven every man must 'do God's pleasure' rather than 'choose and take his own pleasure' (Walker 1963: 125).

Tolkien's 'Leaf by Niggle' introduces the artist not as a saviour but as a 'little man', 'the sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees', yet wants 'to paint a whole tree'. He is 'little' not because he is less talented than other artists, but in comparison to God as the true Artist of the Universe. The tree which Niggle fails to paint

evidently refers to the world tree of mythology as a symbol of the universe. The artist has an ambition to be like God but can only echo the heavens in a Platonic way: it is only in heaven that he finally sees his own Tree completed, alive, 'its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide: "It's a gift!" he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally.'

Tolkien allegorically presents the idea of synergy—the creative cooperation of God and man, which he designates as Creation and Sub-Creation. It is a process that requires all kinds of talents, which God furnishes to his people: Niggle (as an allegory of Art) and his neighbour Parish (an allegory of Life) together reach harmony in the paradise called Niggle's Parish. Both heaven in Tolkien's story and hell in Lewis's are nonetheless depicted in the quasi-Romantic terms of earthly life, where Edenic nature traditionally embodies heaven while Civilization (Town) represents the *infernal* world of darkness and death, the descent into which should paradoxically (as many things sound in Christianity) transfigure human souls. It should teach people the *heavenly* values of love and compassion, how to 'bear one another's burdens', which Charles Williams in his novel *Descent into Hell* (1937) calls the doctrine of Substituted Love.

Hell became one of the most significant metaphors of the twentieth century: after the development of psychoanalysis it is effectively presented as madness either of man or the world surrounding him (Hannah Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Mark Vonnegut's *The Eden Express*, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*).

We can conclude by saying that heaven and hell may be seen as two poles of the vertical dimension in literature. Originally based on the biblical story, they have been greatly reconsidered and developed as metaphors of the social and inner world: while the Descent into Hell may be seen as symbol of literature or of the writer called 'to make Heaven of Hell'.

However, both realms, heaven and hell, in spite of their diverse embodiment in literature, remain profound mysteries, the very inexpressibility of which inspires the poetic imagination:

O world invisible, we view thee,  
 O world intangible, we touch thee,  
 O world unknowable, we know thee,  
 Incomprehensible, we clutch thee!  
 (F. Thompson, *The Kingdom of God*)

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