

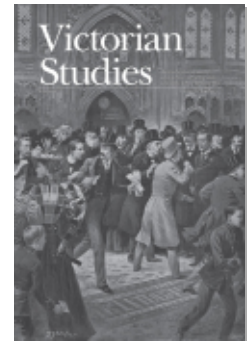


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Victorian Studies, Volume 59, Number 4, Summer 2017, pp. 636-657 (Article)



Published by Indiana University Press

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A Mother's Joy at Her Child's Death: Conversion, Cognitive Dissonance, and Grief

SIMON GOLDHILL

On 9 February 1878 at 10:00 p. m., Martin Benson, just eighteen years old, died at school of what was almost certainly meningitis. He was the beloved son of Edward White Benson and his wife, Minnie Benson (née Sidgwick). Martin Benson was an idealized boy, and in his parents' eyes, the very embodiment of the perfect preparation for a Christian life; his brothers and sisters too described him, with a familial mixture of awe and rivalry, as a paragon.¹ One of the sons, the celebrated novelist E. F. Benson, wrote that on the day of this terrible death, his mother, by the boy's bedside, "had . . . a couple of hours of the most wonderful happiness she had ever experienced" (*Family Affairs* 75). He explained this in terms of her religious feelings: "when she realised that though God had taken, yet she could give," she rejoiced. This was no mere rhetoric: "Her innermost being knew that." The result was that "when she came back to [the family] a few days later, there was no shadow on her" (75). She was a mother who could celebrate her child's death.²

ABSTRACT: This article explores how a sophisticated woman, Minnie Benson, could have rejoiced when her beloved son died at school at age 18. Her joyous reaction—remarked on by all her family—is in stark contrast to that of her husband, Bishop Edward White Benson, who was devastated by the death and found it the most dismaying challenge to his deeply-felt faith. Her reaction is investigated in particular through her personal Evangelical conversion and her commitment to believing literally in joy at suffering. This literalism is set in contrast to standard normative Christian responses to a child's death. The article discusses the cognitive dissonance of religious responses to death in the Victorian era, and how converts are socialized into expected horizons of response.

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This is not just a son's desperate and confused memory, although undoubtedly all the children were surprised and upset by their mother's calmness in contrast to their father's reaction. Minnie Benson herself wrote within an hour of the death to Martin's nurse, Beth, who was as close to the boy as anyone: "He is in perfect peace, in wonderful joy, far happier than we could ever have made him. And what did we desire in our hearts but to make him happy?" She signed the letter "Your fellow mother" (Newsome, *Godliness* 188). The death of her oldest child made her happy, as happy as she knew him to be. "He is gone you know," she wrote to Beth, "Now he is ours and with us more than ever. Ours now in a way that nothing can take away." She even suggests that any regret would be a mistake: "We cannot grudge him his happiness" (188). It might be tempting from a modern psychological point of view to see this as a desperate defense mechanism; but there is no sign of any such thought either in her own writing at the time or in her later analysis of her reaction. To everyone, including herself both in retrospect and in the moment, Minnie Benson sincerely rejoiced in the death of her son.

The contrast with her husband was noted by everyone, including himself. After the boy's death, she knelt and prayed out loud her joyful acceptance of God's plan; the father commented miserably, "I cannot reach this" (Benson, *As We Were* 81). For him the death was inconceivable, terrible. It was so inexplicable that he wanted to die himself in order to understand it. "Why?" he writes again and again in his diary and letters—a single burning word of pain. When he came home, he showed "the face of a most loving man stricken with the death of the boy he loved best, who had been nearest his heart, and was knit into his very soul." "He could not adapt himself to it," and was crushed by its memory for the rest of his life (Benson, *Family Affairs* 75). It changed his view of life, he confessed. He wrote letter after letter to his friends, and even more pained comments in his diary, about how "inconceivable" it was that such promise should be unfulfilled. It was for Edward White Benson a break in what had appeared to be God's will: "His path seemed to run on so completely in God's own way: we thought all God's plan for him was running so sweetly towards some noble God's work" (Benson, *Life of Edward* 144). He knows he should see the death as God's plan, but struggles to do so: he feels "compelled to believe" that all is for the good, "and yet—he is dead" (qtd. in Newsome, *Godliness* 192). Back in 1861 when Prince Albert died, Edward White Benson, then Headmaster of Wellington College, preached a sermon that summarized the expected norms of public grief: "No-one," he wrote, even those who did not know the Prince personally (as he did), "need to be ashamed to sorrow indeed" (*A Sermon* 12).³ These pieties rang all too hollow in the face of his now crushing

despair. His faith was profoundly challenged: “If anything ought to strengthen one it is a life like Martin’s: we can only pray it may.” His struggle, marked by the underlined contrast between “ought” and “may,” is painfully intense, earnest, and repeatedly insufficient to him: “It takes all my confidence in his present to keep me from murmuring,” he writes, and, recognizing the slipping of such confidence, “I hope that I shall be able to win more faith” (Benson, *Life of Edward* 445). His terrible fear of his own feelings is highlighted for him as he looks at his wife: “His mother’s bearing of all seems to me as perfect as can be” (Benson, *As We Were* 81).

What makes the stark contrast of the rejoicing mother and the terrified, heart-broken father so particularly telling is that Edward White Benson was the bishop of Truro—a staunch, passionate Christian who was shortly to become the most influential Archbishop of Canterbury during Queen Victoria’s reign—while Minnie Benson has entered modern historiography most famously as a smart and witty lesbian, who spent the last twenty years of her life sharing a bed with the daughter of the previous Archbishop of Canterbury.⁴ It is this scene of desperate father and rejoicing mother that I want to try to comprehend.

To explore how Minnie Benson could rejoice at her son’s death, it will be necessary not merely to contextualize her response within a general Victorian framework, but also to compare her both with the expectations of handbooks on normative grief and mourning, and with other personal experiences of potentially overwhelming losses—in particular, through the relentlessly mainstream Lady Eastlake’s advice to mourning women, and the unbearable horror of another archbishop’s wife, Catharine Tait, who lost five children to disease in the space of a few days. Minnie Benson will emerge in her vivid particularity, but the value of such a limit case is precisely the light it can throw on the conventions of normativity, and on the work that it takes to maintain the boundaries of communal values under severe stress. Minnie’s joy is undoubtedly a disturbing image for a modern audience, but it is the contention of this article that it can reveal a foundational tension—a cognitive dissonance—at the center of the Victorian discourse of mourning, especially mourning for a dead child.

I.

There are five key discursive frameworks that inform this dramatic story’s complex and heady narrative, each of which requires some initial exposition. First, conversion. Minnie Benson, as we will see, had recently experienced a personal conversion to an Evangelical Christianity. In the heated battles over religion that run through the nineteenth century, the scene—and

comprehension—of conversion is a central motif. Conversion becomes a strident source of contention in Britain in the clashes between Evangelical and Broad Church self-representations, and specifically in the swirl of doubts about the intentions of Tractarians and other high church figures with regard to Rome. But equally intense debates are played out in the space of missionary activity, both within the new urban environments of the nineteenth-century industrial city and within the imperial project of bringing Christianity to the further reaches of Empire.⁵ Indeed, as Britain moved toward both the construction of a “tolerant state” and a developed and contested imperial agenda of cultural transformation in its colonies, conversion should be seen—in the words of Gauri Viswanathan—as a challenging “subversion of secular power” (3). For Viswanathan, conversion constitutes a flashpoint in the increasingly tense interaction between the religious establishment of Britain and a growing rejection of it both in religious dissent and in materialist anti-religious thinking. At the heart of the household of the head of the Anglican Communion, Minnie Benson’s conversion—and its representation by herself and her family—is framed by these large-scale narratives.

This concern with conversion is enacted at multiple levels and in multiple genres and media, from high art (think of Edwin Long’s “Diana or Christ?,” or William Holman Hunt’s “The Awakening Conscience” or his “Light of the World,” the most reproduced image of the century)⁶ to novels (fiction set in the Roman Empire, for instance, stages conversion after conversion, often in naïve and cloying fashion)⁷ to autobiographical narratives and news stories (the Cambridge Seven, for example, or, most famously, John Henry Newman’s conversion and the spat with Charles Kingsley that led to his great volume, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* [1864]).⁸ These works provide not merely a privileged narrative for such transformations, but also the normative shape of the experience of conversion. What is most important for the story of Minnie Benson, however, is that conversion raised specific issues of truth and self-knowledge. Did conversion mean the death of the past within the life of the convert? Was transformation a moment of revelation or grace, or a process over time? Could any conversion be trusted as sincere and complete? These fundamental questions overlapped with new interests in psychology and other scientific diagnoses of the self, and found further exploration in the burgeoning form of the Bildungsroman.⁹

These multiform representations of conversion offered varied dominant paradigms. The mass meeting, for instance, was a particularly evocative and dramatic theater of Evangelical conversion iconically represented by the popular mission of Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey, who were witnessed by around a million and a half people in London in 1875, with regular audiences of 20,000

a night.¹⁰ The welcoming embrace of a smaller, engaged community (such as that provided by the Clapham Sect) was a more intellectual as well as a social lure (though the oppressiveness of such communal ties is vividly articulated by the autobiographical writing of Edmund Gosse, a close friend of Minnie's son Arthur).¹¹ Mrs. Humphry Ward's best-seller *Robert Elsmere* (1888) represented a loss of faith—the *inverse* of Evangelical conversion—through the study of ancient texts and the effects of critical history, while Cardinal Newman—whose *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* was the most reflective, and for his enemies the most dangerous conversion narrative—found its “rock in antiquity” (132).¹² At this most elite, academic level, conversion was a response to deep study and the claims of new historical methods. Minnie's conversion, however, in contrast with these dominant paradigms, was individual—that is, it was the result of a personal interaction with one other Evangelical woman. It was for her an internal experience, as we will see, and she responds to the death of her child as such a convert.

To gauge the anxiety about the transformative dynamic of conversion, we can take as exemplary the public critical responses to the book *Ecce Homo*. An anonymous reflection on the historical nature of the life of Jesus (later acknowledged to be the work of John Seeley, professor of Latin at London, and afterwards of Modern History at Cambridge), *Ecce Homo* “played havoc with the traditional parties of British thought” (Pals 47), because, as John Henry Newman worried, it was impossible to determine whether the author “was an orthodox believer on his road to liberalism, or a liberal on his way to orthodoxy” (“Review” 564). Uncertainty about the direction of travel—or, more precisely, about the reader's ability to be sure about what the author's transformation in the book had been—produced the “havoc” expressed in the over-heated and confused responses it elicited. The book became a *cause célèbre* precisely because it provoked an insistent anxiety about how to comprehend an individual's conversion. Conversion repeatedly raises vexing issues of how the public acknowledgement of a person's transformation is to be expressed with regard to two competing vectors: on the one hand, the recognition that a fluidity of self is necessary for a change to have taken place; on the other, the insistence on resistance to change, which typifies extreme affiliations. How are institutional power and personal agency to be expressed through the narratives and practices of conversion? These issues will return in our discussion of Minnie Benson—indeed, in her case this anxiety about the sincerity and completeness of conversion continues to resound. When E. F. Benson writes that “Her innermost being knew that,” he is anticipating and defending against any doubt as to whether lingering maternal feelings were disturbing her griefless response. The family had to be sure that Minnie's joy was sincere. She is—she

must be in the eyes of her family—"as perfect as can be," and her exemplarity is formulated within a narrative of achieved conversion and the religious certainty it ideally provides.

This proclaimed exemplarity leads directly to my second discursive framework; namely, literalism and the gap between knowledge and knowingness. Literalism stands at the center of the conflict between Evangelical Christians, who claim that the literal truth of scripture is their guiding light, and other Christians—a performed contest over how the Bible is to be read, comprehended, and made the basis of a lived ethical existence. Minnie Benson acts out her belief not merely through her faith in an afterlife—a basic belief shared by all branches of Christianity—nor merely in the promise of the Christian scriptures that death is a joyful release into an everlasting life of bliss, but also in the injunction to joy in suffering. She believes literally in the command to rejoice: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2–3); "Rejoice in as much as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:13). The secure blessedness and happiness of her child in heaven is guaranteed. *Therefore* she celebrates his death. If the death of a child is a trial, it is an occasion *therefore* to rejoice. It does not matter that such literalism could itself be called a constructed interpretation, dependent on selective readings and misprisions. Rather, what is important, as we will see, is that this literal understanding is to be juxtaposed with a more socially normative and more usually enacted ambivalence that oscillates between grief, hopefulness, and resignation. It is this Evangelical literalism that takes Minnie beyond the fervent or intense belief that links her to so many Christians of her generation, including her husband.

The literal has been recently marked out by modern scholars both as a feature of Victorian prose, in which scientific or technical details create a hard-edged narrative of things, and as a question for literary criticism with its search for a necessary depth, below or beyond the surface.¹³ This sophisticated discussion needs to be reframed with a recognition of the long tradition of religious hermeneutics in the intellectual articulation of surface and depth, literalism, and interpretative zeal (especially considering the fact that "close reading" as a practice integral to literary scholarship's self-representation has deep roots in the Protestant commitment to *sola scriptura* as well as the hermeneutics of reading associated with such religious dogma).¹⁴ Yet there is no place where the literal can cause so thoroughgoing a cognitive crisis as in the Christian religion. On the one hand, it would nowadays be considered a sign of desperate fundamentalism to understand the word "day" as no more than a "day" in the creation story of Genesis: literalism here would be viewed, even (and

especially) by most contemporary theologians, as a misreading of the word of God, regardless of how scripture has been understood in the past. Re-reading the literal sense of the text as non-literal has been crucial to its continuing impact. On the other hand, the ostensive, indicative meaning of the sentence “hoc est meum corpus”—“this is my body”—goes to the very heart of the schism between churches, still bitterly policed. A philosophy of transubstantiation and incarnation *requires* a stance on the literal in the word of God; Christianity *has* to struggle over its literalism.¹⁵ Christianity—to simplify—for all that it has a developed typological and allegorical tradition, is still traumatized by the competing claims of Protestantism’s commitment to *sola scriptura* and Catholicism’s authority of tradition; or, to put it with even more stark oversimplification, whether wine is literally wine, blood literally blood. The question is not whether all or most Christians are committed in some way to a literal truth of scripture, or even to its primacy. The question is: when is such literalism to be mediated into other modes of reading? What are the boundaries and regulations of literalism? In the nineteenth century, this arena of negotiation is a familiar and particularly vexed source of tension between Evangelical and other Christian groups—when even to suggest that the Bible should be read like any other book could result in vitriolic criticism, as Benjamin Jowett found out in the *Essays and Reviews* scandal.¹⁶ Minnie Benson’s literalism—her total acceptance of the injunction to joyfulness—still has the power to shock, and, as we will see, is intimately connected to her Evangelical conversion.

Nineteenth-century Britain certainly had its particular rituals, practices, and beliefs about death—my third discursive framework—which have been extensively outlined by contemporary scholarship: patterns of ritual; the role of great men’s funerals; literary death-bed scenes; medical practice, dissection, and the use of cadavers; the material culture of funerals; and the material practices of memorialization have been incisively and insightfully studied.¹⁷ How much, how deeply to mourn became a pressing concern in the latter half of the nineteenth century, not least because of the reaction of Queen Victoria to the death of her husband, Albert, and her subsequent withdrawal from public life.¹⁸ Her response made mourning, as *The Times* commented with a strangely inappropriate phrase (reflecting the paper’s anxiety of evaluation), “a sort of religion” (qtd. in Darby and Smith 20). Many sermons were preached on the death of great men, and of less well-known but exemplary Christian figures. It is against these public ceremonials, with their expected outpourings of grief, that Minnie’s joyful reaction resounds with a strikingly vivid distance.

Yet this scene of Bishop Benson and his wife also offers a different perspective that is telling. It allows us to explore how religious dogma becomes personal

experience—as well as the gap between dogma and personal feeling—and also how competing religious ideas in the same room produce a dramatic recognition and performance of difference—rather than ritual community—in response to a life crisis. Both the bishop and his wife are passionately committed to a notion of a Christian afterlife and to their son's access to it, but the contrast between the Evangelical and non-institutional Christian, on the one hand, and the institutional Anglican prelate, on the other, fragments the scene into a diptych of celebrating mother and broken father. The other children, the nanny, and friends are drawn into negotiating the scene of difference by narrating, discussing, and explaining it. The *need* to narrate, discuss, and explain, is the sign and symptom of the discomfort that the scene produces.

Religious difference grounds the contrast, but—and these are the scene's fourth and fifth framing discourses—so too do expectations of gender and expectations of emotional display. I combine these two framing discourses, each of which has been the subject of so much important recent analysis, because it is precisely the overlap between them—the gendered understanding of emotional response—that concerns us here. Although the familiar image of the stern, austere, and stiff Victorian father with his caring, gentle, and tender wife is a stereotype that has been significantly recalibrated, expectations of the affective ties of motherhood are fundamental to the surprise elicited by this death-bed scene.¹⁹ As we will discover, Minnie Benson stands at an oblique angle to many of the gender expectations of nineteenth-century female behavior, but what makes her response to her son's death remarkable is precisely its contrast with the normative stereotype of maternal care, and even with the grief of the Christian mother epitomized by Mary at the foot of the cross. This stereotype includes a tendency toward emotional display, physicalized in the tears of grief. Men may cry, but the logic of the “stiff upper lip” taking shape over these later decades of the century allows emotional display at sentimental events in life or in the theater—Benson, without any challenge to his masculinity, sobbed at the boys' reaction to his last day as Headmaster of Wellington—but the same license was less willingly shown in response to pain or disaster.²⁰ Again, it is the contrast between wife and husband that signifies, calling for comment at the time, and for careful explication now.

Taken together, these five arenas of social discourse—conversion, literalism and knowingness, approaches to death, gender expectations, and expectations of emotional display—provide a necessary normative framework within which to comprehend the specificity of this scene. But before we can turn to calibrate its particular dynamics, the peculiar relationship between Bishop Benson and his wife requires some attention. For how their scene of grief may

be exemplary of nineteenth-century responses to a child's death also depends on how its leading players are represented both then and now.

II.

Edward White Benson is a classic story of Victorian success. He rose from an impoverished background, via notable success at Cambridge, into a fellowship at Trinity College, followed (in a standard move) by a transfer into teaching, rising to become Headmaster of the new Wellington College under the direct patronage of Prince Albert. He left this role to enter the church, first at Lincoln, and then as the first bishop of the new see at Truro where he founded the first new cathedral in England since the Middle Ages.²¹ From that triumphant foundation he became the Archbishop of Canterbury, delivering the Lincoln Judgement, which effectively closed the heated debates about ritualism in the Anglican Church. Edward White Benson was a domineering, ambitious, fiercely charismatic man who suffered from depression throughout his life. His children considered him with awe, terror, frightened love, and a desperate need for approbation. He had kissed and proposed marriage to Minnie Sidgwick, the sister of the great philosopher Henry Sidgwick, when she was twelve years old. They married when she was eighteen. Her later description of their wedding night is harrowing. She already had inklings that her desire was reserved for women, yet he had waited in earnest chastity for this moment for many years. She ends her tale of mismatched feelings and despair with the bare statement that she cried throughout her honeymoon.²²

Edward and Minnie Benson had six children, none of whom ever had heterosexual intercourse, as far as we are aware (certainly none of them ever married).²³ Throughout this time Minnie Benson had a series of crushes on women—at one point leaving her family, including the five-month-old baby, and staying in Germany, in love with a Miss Hall. Edward knew about her feelings and sat her on his knee and reminded her of duty. She always returned to the marriage, which was (outwardly) a loving and caring one—as indeed, in its turmoil, it was. After Benson's early death, Minnie was devastated; her diary of mourning is a bitter and desperately sad document of loss. Yet she ended up sleeping in the same bed (though repeatedly trying to avoid what she called the carnal stain) with Lucy Tait, the daughter of the previous archbishop, Archibald Campbell Tait. During some of these years, she was also living with her own daughter, Maggie, and Maggie's lover, Nettie Gourlay. Each of the boys, Arthur, Fred, and Hugh, seem to have had deeply repressed feelings for men.²⁴

So how did Minnie Benson, the celebrated conversationalist, lover of women, beloved and happy mother, hostess to the great and good of Victorian society—the woman whom William Gladstone called the cleverest woman in Europe—reach the point at which she could find the most wonderful happiness on the day her oldest son died?

When she came back from Germany—vulnerable and depressed after the collapse of her relationship with Miss Hall and the trauma of leaving her young children for several months—she met, in Lincoln, where the family now lived, a Mrs. Mylne.²⁵ Mrs. Mylne, who was older than Minnie and had studied theology, was a committed Evangelical Christian.²⁶ The two women swiftly became close, but the familiar emotions of intense female intimacy took on a more religious dynamic. Mrs. Mylne and her husband were both enthusiastic urban missionaries in Lincoln. Mrs. Mylne seems to have led Minnie, with all the heated rhetoric of Evangelical promise, towards a moral and spiritual transformation. She persuaded Minnie to keep a spiritual diary listing her faults and anxieties. She then criticized Minnie for the miseries of her daily life (as she had recorded them) and, in particular, anatomized the unhappy stresses and strains of her marriage. Above all, she insisted that the cause of her misery was her own sinfulness. The feelings of love Minnie felt for humans, proclaimed Mrs. Mylne, must be directed towards God. Minnie's own recollections rehearse this discovery of her sinfulness with painful self-exposure. "Is it not really the same sin in my neglects and my loves?" she wrote ("Diary," Benson Family Papers 1/79, 25). Under Mrs. Mylne's guidance she came to see her poor housekeeping, her erotic feelings for other women, and her harsh and ambivalent feelings for her husband as interlinked vectors of the same moral and spiritual failing. "Burn this out" is violently stabbed by her pen into the margins of her diary. Her strident prayers increasingly sound like a revivalist meeting: "Rouse, cleanse, fill." "Possess and purify my heart" ("Diary," Benson Family Papers 1/79, 20). Finally, in 1876, at the age of 35, Minnie's Evangelical conversion transformed her depressive state, her unfulfilled lusts, and the turmoil of her marriage, into a deeply committed belief in a personal God.

Personal religion required personal change, a change at the core of the self. She did not, however, change her institutional life. In contrast to her husband—an institutional religious man if ever there were one—Minnie's religion was a private, bedroom thing. It framed her relationships. While she still revelled in intimate, funny, intense, erotic conversations with women, cajoled, encouraged, and criticized her children, and played hostess to a string of grand and cultivated visitors, she saw herself otherwise. It is not enough, then, to suggest—as Patricia Jalland does in her excellent discussion of children's

deaths—that Edward and Minnie respond differently simply because of their respective genders: it is, instead, Minnie’s religious conversion that underlies her response. It is from this place that she can rejoice in her son’s death.²⁷

So the contrasting responses of Edward and Minnie Benson to their son’s death forms a complexly layered scene. The convert expresses a personal religious fervor—a literalism grounded in Evangelical principle, which embraces her son’s projected (assured) happiness, distances her from her husband’s grief, and ties her to her beloved mentor Mrs. Mylne. The bishop is deeply committed—emotionally, intellectually, institutionally—to a continuity of religious life which makes the death of the son a crushing blow, from which perspective he can only observe his difference from his wife. The contrasting ways in which religious positions frame personal experience are made far more intricate by the family dynamics and sexualized tension between husband and wife—their history of mismatched feelings. It is because religious belief and personal, eroticized relationships are so intertwined here that the scene is so emotionally overlaid and overwrought.

Does this make Bishop Benson and his wife no more than an oddity (however fascinating an oddity) in the rich world of Victorian practices of grief? I think not, and a contrast with normative writing on grief—especially grief for a dead child—will help us see how the very oddity of the Bensons’ mismatched feelings—and especially Mrs. Benson’s literalism of belief—reveals the dominant logic of the cognitive dissonance at the heart of Victorian Christian mourning, and how hard it could prove to negotiate this dissonance.

III.

Lady Elizabeth Eastlake was a notable intellectual whose art history criticism set a tone of response for the many who, like her, did not follow John Ruskin slavishly. Three years after her husband died, she published in 1868 a little book called *Fellowship: Letters addressed to my sister mourners*. It reflects fascinatingly on a religious response to death. It is particular to Christianity, she begins, that “our very religion seems to fail us at the time we need it most” (22). One of the penalties of living in a religious age, she continues, is the way in which religion puts impossible expectations on the mourner. “The religious education of many is based upon assertions and descriptions, which, when tested, are not found literally true” (36). What does she mean? She is explicit that friends and family expect that she, as a person of committed religious faith, will find comfort in Christ and will bear what is sent with resignation. But, she states, “There is a long battle to be fought before we can ‘rejoice in affliction’” (38).

Society is too insistent, too quick on the certainty of religious relief: "Good people are naturally anxious that we should give evidence of the faith that is in us. But they are too hasty for us at this early period" (55–56).²⁸ To rejoice in affliction, argues Lady Eastlake, requires the misprision of literalness. For her the mourner is "stricken, writhing, amazed" (14); the Christian is necessarily wracked by doubt at exactly the moment when he or she needs religion most. For Lady Eastlake writing to her sister mourners, it is crucial to recognize and accept the negotiated cognitive dissonance of Christian grief. It is a mistake to take as "literally true" what you are told.

Lady Eastlake, in her public role, offers advice that many could take to heart. Many in the latter half of the nineteenth century would have subscribed to a confidence in a personal heaven: it may have been a cliché of mourning, as Elisabeth Darby and Nicola Smith note, to imagine a beloved one looking down, "alive but invisible," "but in this particular period it was subject to literal interpretation as never before" (3).²⁹ The rhetoric of comfort, promising a meeting to come in a blissful heaven, was pervasive. Indeed, William Branks's *Heaven Our Home*, published in 1861, went through over 88 editions and 100,000 copies were sold. This volume promoted an image of a personal, social, domestic heaven, with plenty of happy chat, that would lead any "poor, sorrowing mother still on earth" to a "joyful and comforting" vision of her dead children playing with their "immortal companions" (36). As the anonymous and even more sentimental *Our Children's Rest or Comfort for Bereaved Mothers* (1863) insists, against the threat of "the wailing sobs and pants of hopeless sorrow" (67), a Christian mother can be comforted of her dead child: "We had joy and peace in the glorious belief that she was SAFE, *eternally safe with Jesus*" (19). Yet even for Branks this vision did not necessarily mean an instant transformation into the celebration of death. Far from it; he recognized the "tumultuous sorrow in your hearts who are parents . . . when you look upon a beloved child going from you . . . to be laid in the grave" (27). He held out, rather, the promise: "I will see you again" (39). Such a promise was indeed repeatedly held out. Robert Bickersteth's popular anthology, *The Recognition of Friends in Heaven* (1866), insisted on a continuing personal, social life after death and asked—with what Maia McAleavey calls "part threat, part assurance" ("Angelic Bigamy" 192)—"Reader, have you a little white-faced warbler in the celestial choir? Are you content to see his face no more for ever?" (308). *Prayers for the Sick and Dying* (1853), a popular anthology put together by F. D. Maurice's sister, Priscilla, proclaimed "I will meet again so many of those I have loved on earth" (179).³⁰ What must be expected therefore in a Christian mourner is a resigned recognition that, despite the religious certainty of the

blissful transcendence of death, grief for lost ones is fully part of the emotional and social expectations of a Christian community.

Edward White Benson certainly dramatizes this tension between expected belief and felt anguish with painful vividness: “and yet—he is dead.” The intensity and painfulness of his grief over many years contrasts not just with his own restrained emotion at Prince Albert’s death, but also with typical Anglican sermons on the death of a child. Reverend G. T. Warner, for example, upon the death of the sixteen-year-old son of the Duke of Clarence at Harrow school, reminds the congregation that anyone “who believes that the spirit of all who depart hence in the Lord, are even now in rest and felicity” must also believe that the boy died “happy” at the prospect of his own death (16). Charles Vaughan, the soon-to-be disgraced Headmaster of the school (and future teacher of Minnie Benson’s son, Hugh, at Llandaff Clerical College) upped the rhetoric: “I will call upon you to thank God for taking one, of whom, ill as we could spare him, we could say with confidence that he was fit to die” (Warner 23). Benson knew his son was “fit to die” but could never thank God for taking him, nor lose the bitterness of his feelings.

But perhaps the most telling and pertinent account of the negotiation of grief and faith comes from the Tait family. Archibald Campbell Tait, in a career very similar to that of Benson, had been a schoolmaster—the successor to Thomas Arnold as Headmaster of Rugby—after he had held a fellowship at Balliol College, Oxford. He succeeded Charles Blomfield as Bishop of London and became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1868. Under his direction, the church wrestled with the Oxford Movement and the subsequent arguments over ritualism. He married Catharine Spooner in 1843, and by 1856 they had seven children. In that year, within the space of only five weeks, five of the children, aged 2 to 10, died from a particularly virulent form of scarlet fever. The only son, Craufurd, later died as a young man. The girl who survived, Lucy, grew up to live with the Bensons and share Minnie Benson’s bed.

In 1874, eighteen years after the deaths, Catharine Tait wrote a long, private, retrospective account of her experience of losing five children. As Lady Eastlake indicated, time for grieving necessarily frames Christian forbearance. She addressed it to her son and left it, unread and unknown to anyone else, in a drawer where it was discovered at her death. After the death of their son, Craufurd, and after the death of Catharine herself, the Archbishop instructed the Reverend William Benham to prepare a memoir of his wife and son for publication, and the private mourning diary was included verbatim in this memoir. Benham was the son of a rural postmaster, who worked as a teacher and rose through the church, partly through the patronage of Archbishop Longley,

who installed him as Vicar of Addington, where the Archbishop's residence was located, and he became a noted literary figure, who published an edition of William Cowper's poems as well as works on church history. He went on to co-author the biography of Archbishop Tait with Randall Davidson, who himself became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1903, and who married Edith Tait, the daughter of Archbishop Tait (she was born after the scarlet fever episode). Benham was appointed Honorary Canon of Canterbury by Archbishop Benson. Benham, in short, despite his moderately humble background, was deeply connected in the educational, ecclesiastical, and literary worlds mapped out by the interconnected families of the Bensons, Tait's, and Davidsons (among others) at the heart of the broad church establishment in Victorian England. He was in a position to speak with authority.

Benham was clear about the purpose of publishing the memoir. He indicates, with paradigmatic propriety, that it is a matter of delicacy to publish it at all, but that "the lessons which these Memorials are likely, under God's blessing, to call forth" are "too important for the Church of God to allow them to lie buried within the sanctity of home" (vi).³¹ What are these lessons? "Tender piety and brave Christian endurance"; this endurance is explained as "the power of continuance in prayer to sustain and cheer when the character is chastened by that discipline of suffering which a loving Father sends to us all, if we will but recognize it as coming from His hand" (vii). This is as typical a statement as those of Lady Eastlake. Suffering is terrible, and the only hope is to recognize it as sent by God as a chastening discipline, and thus to struggle to sustain oneself through prayer.

Catharine Tait, however, is also clear that writing her memorial is intended as a normative lesson to help those "who are feeling that [their burden] is too heavy for them to bear"—a motive similar to Lady Eastlake's express aim. "I think," she writes with directness, "that we suffered at that time as much as it was possible to suffer;" and is now looking back from a life full of subsequent blessings (252). This narrative is one of pain recollected from later survival to help others through such trauma. It has therefore a precise rhetoric of anticipated and recollected horror, tempered but not reduced by subsequent experience. This is emotion recollected, but barely in tranquility and certainly not in joy.

The image of maternal love is painfully intense, even if the sentimentality is unlikely to conform to modern sensibilities: "I bent over little Chatty, who awoke while I was watching her, and looked up with a face of heavenly beauty and joy I never can forget. I found it difficult to tear myself away from her even to look at the baby [Lucy], her joy and mine was so great at meeting again" (254–55). The adjective "heavenly" anticipates the claim God will make on the child's beauty,

as “meeting again” echoes the funeral promise of a Christian afterlife. “I never can forget” invests the picture with the death and remembrance to come. The implications are made explicit as the scene develops: “What will she, ‘my earthly child,’ as I used to call her, be like when we see her again?” (257). This rhetoric is repeated again and again, with increasing emotion, as she describes the ideal family home in the process of being destroyed by illness.

Catharine’s feelings, from the moment of the first child’s first symptoms—with whatever retrospective redrafting—are profoundly anxious: “I felt much alarmed, and a weight of sorrow came on my heart” (282). As the girl approaches death, Archibald Tait’s “dear heart was torn with bitter grief” (288); Catharine takes to her bed “feeling the greatness of our loss” (291), and although “we felt this was bitterness enough,” the first horror is only the beginning as the story unfurls over four more deaths. Catharine learns “a solemn lesson, that we cannot choose the circumstances of our grief” (295), as she struggles between trying to cheer and protect her children without collapsing into her own despair, while “there rushed to my heart a feeling of separation from them which I could not bear, and an intense faintness” (301). She feels “very ill,” what she sees is “full of agony,” making her “anxious, most anxious” (311–12). As each child passes, the scene, with lavish attention to the child’s symptoms, becomes more desperate and the feelings more painful: “agony and terror” (335). Tait bursts into floods of tears for Catharine: “the agony was too much for me; my strength gave way; I could not stay beside her” (363). After more than four weeks of anguish, in the middle of the night by the bed of her daughter, May, the last to die, exhausted, she found some peace: “the greatness of eternity in comparison to time came over me.” For the first time, she says she could “even rejoice in the certainty of that blessedness into which my darlings had entered”—but this moment passes, and May’s slow and painful death produces agony, anguish, and terror in her mother (378).

This extraordinary document is nearly a hundred and fifty pages in print, and is a serious composition of private memorial: she did not show it to its imagined addressee, and did not address it to her husband. Apart from the single sentence portraying a brief moment of late night calm, the narrative is a relentless account of misplaced hope, challenged faith, desperate care, and the awful battle between encouraging her children and trying to deal with her agonized heartbreak. It is, she concludes, despite a life of prayer, a memory of “bitter anguish” (392). Written over many days by an archbishop’s wife, many years after the events it records, kept in secret, and then with careful propriety and permission published by a close associate of the family, the text comes framed with layers of authority and authorization. It is designed to be an exemplary

account of Christian endurance of the highest order. Prayer mitigates but does not staunch the bitter anguish; any small climactic recognition of eternal joy is also framed by the repetitions of pain, not by the achievement of transcendence. The slipping attempts to control overwhelming grief preclude any lasting transformation into joy.

Catharine Tait's retrospective record is explicitly announced as didactic—a monument that begins as a private, undelivered document for her son. It portrays the struggle with despair and the tentative, long process toward reconciliation or resignation. It is a narrative that embodies in full the bare admonishments of Lady Eastlake's public, normative, and rather genteel reflections on the difficulty of following religious injunctions toward joy at the crisis moments of loss, and the slowness of recovery from grief. Both texts contrast strikingly with Minnie Benson's immediate two hours of happiness and unbroken grieflessness.

IV.

Minnie Benson's conversion—a full change of the self—required, then, a full and integral repression of the cognitive dissonance that her husband, the bishop, performed in his Christianity, or that Lady Eastlake and Catharine Tait experienced, advised, and embodied as committed Christians. Their recognition of trembling and shaken faith, and the contrast between any faint promise of bliss and the overwhelming grief of loss, is quite absent both in Minnie's express language and in the understanding of her emotions by herself, by her family, and by others who saw her. The convert, it seems, can live literally the promise of comfort and joy—a joy that is recognized as impossible by her husband, by the normative discourse of the day, and by the experience of other mothers from the same religious milieu who experienced overwhelming loss. All could agree on the eternal happiness of heaven—but only to Minnie, the convert, did such a promise efface in joy the despair and grief at loss. She could, unlike Lady Eastlake, “rejoice in affliction” and take such an injunction as “literally true.” Such literalness is the sign of the child, the innocent, the fool—and the convert. The hardest thing for a convert to do, then, is to live the compromises and dissonances of the social group—whose sociality is dependent on misrecognizing the literalness of its own language.

The experiences of these three women—Catharine Tait, Lady Eastlake, and Minnie Benson—took place in an era in which the novels of doubt, loss of faith, or conversion and reconversion, had become recognized genres—signs and symptoms of the heated concern for understanding, protecting, and

challenging religious faith in a self-proclaimed modern society.³² One of the repeated anxieties about religious conversion in Christianity, which is part of such debates, is the degree to which conversion can be said to be true and fixed. (The long history of testing the catechumen or of the Inquisition's more brutal inquiries is predicated on uncertainty about paraded conversion.) This is in part, of course, because there cannot be any adequate test of internal attitudes or feelings, and explicit utterances are always open to the suspicion of lying, misrepresentation, or misunderstanding. But the literalness of the convert also contributes to such modern anxieties, because it necessarily places the convert in tension with the lived negotiations of the sociality of religion. The upset or confusion at Minnie Benson's joy at her child's death is elicited in part because it exposes in the most vivid and stark terms the embarrassment that Mrs. Eastlake announces with her recognition that the assertions of religion are not literally true. As it contrasts sharply with the struggle the Taitis experienced to reach any consolation for their children's deaths, the convert's literalness is a challenge to the community's enacted sociality. Minnie Benson's joy provokes disturbance not just because of a moral distaste for a celebration of a child's death, but also because it is awful, when it is not comic, not to recognize the negotiated social tropes by which we live. The exception that is Minnie Benson vividly reveals the tensions of Christian mourning at the normative center of social form.

Eighteen years later in 1896, however, Minnie was devastated by her husband's death, for all her conflicted feelings toward him. She grieved for long months, and wrote a private spiritual diary of her mourning. Loss turned to resignation only after the duration of pain. Perhaps it was because she had such conflicted feelings about her husband in contrast to her son that her mourning was now so intense. But I would rather see it as a case of just how hard—impossible, perhaps—it is, even for a convert, to live on in the literalness of the promises of conversion—and be social. Minnie Benson, the widow of Queen Victoria's archbishop, had been socialized out of the literalness of the convert and into the cognitive dissonance of normative Christian grief.

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NOTES

Thanks to two research projects that have contributed to my understanding: "The Bible and Antiquity in Nineteenth-Century Culture" funded by the European Research Council (grant #295463), with special thanks to my co-director Michael Ledger Lomas; and "Early Modern Conversions" at Montreal funded by the Canadian Social Sciences

and Humanities Research Council, with special thanks to Paul Yachnin and Mark Vessey. A short version of this paper was presented at the "Moving Minds: Converting Cognition and Emotion in History" conference at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

1. Martin's life and his family's response to it is discussed fully in Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning*.

2. I have briefly discussed Martin Benson's death and his mother's response to it in chapters 17 and 18 of my book, *A Very Queer Family Indeed: Sex, Religion and the Bensons in Victorian Britain* (2016). This article grows out of that work and attempts for the first time to contextualize and explain this event within a broader Victorian framework of conversion, female grief, and the cognitive dissonance integral to religious responses to shocking loss.

3. See also Benson's collected sermons in his *Boy Life*.

4. See especially Vicinus; Marcus. For more general background, see Medd; Castle.

5. For exemplary histories, see Adams; Bebbington; Porter; Stanley; Wheeler, *Old Enemies*.

6. See Cheeke; Nichols.

7. See Goldhill, *Victorian Culture*, 153–244; Wolff.

8. See Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt*; Pollock; Griffin.

9. See Shuttleworth, *Mind*; Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë*; Moretti.

10. On Moody and Sankey and the figures of attendance, see Hylson-Smith or contemporary hagiography such as Goodspeed.

11. On the Clapham Sect, see e. g. Stott (with further bibliography). On Gosse and his *Father and Son*, see Thwaite.

12. On Ward, see Sutherland. On history as a route toward doubt, see Goldhill, *Victorian Culture*, 153–92.

13. See Best and Marcus; Freedgood and Schmitt; Schmitt.

14. See Anger.

15. From a large bibliography, see e. g. Wheeler, *Old Enemies*; Larsen, *Contested Christianity*. For a deep history, see Brown; Rubin. For a survey of Anglican views, see Douglas. The nineteenth century was particularly interested in the history of the Eucharist as part of the struggle over the history of the church. See e. g. Bridgett; Dawson; Wilberforce; Martin.

16. See Altholz; Shea and Whitla; Faber.

17. See Jalland; Richardson; Rowell; Schor; Wheeler, *Death*; Wolffe; Zigarovich.

18. See Darby and Smith; Rappaport. For a broader background, see Munich; Homans. For the general injunction to avoid material extravagance mixed with the injunction to represent class and status in mourning, see Curl, 197–99.

19. See Broughton; Broughton and Rodgers; Nelson; Sanders; Tosh.

20. See Dixon, *Weeping Britannia*; Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*.

21. See Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family*, 6.

22. See Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family*; Benson, *Life of Edward*.

23. See Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family*, 4.

24. See Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family*; Newsome, *On the Edge of Paradise*.

25. See Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family*, 225–30; Bolt, 119–23; Benson, *Mother*.

26. See Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family*, 225.

27. “Gendered difference was evident in the response of Edward White Benson and his wife, Mary [Minnie] to the death” (Jalland 139).

28. Mrs. Oliphant’s *Autobiography* breaks off heartbreakingly with the death of her grown son and the two single sentence paragraphs, “And now here I am all alone. I cannot write any more” (150). Her letters are typical of a stricken Christian in grief.

29. See Davidson and Benham.

30. For an excellent discussion of couples reunited after death, see McAleavey Soul-mates: “*David Copperfield’s* Angelic Bigamy.”

31. The document and its context are excellently discussed by Jalland, 119–42.

32. See Helmstedter and Lightman; Jay; Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt*; Wolff.

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