A Long-Forgotten Sorrow: The Mourning Journal of Melesina Trench

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IN JUNE 1806, Melesina Trench (1768–1827), an Anglo-Irish poet[1] detained in Orléans, France, as an "enemy national" by Napoleon, began to write in a new journal: "Frederick Trench expired at a quarter before eight O clock in the evening, June the seventh, 1806 aged two years, eight months and five days" (see figure 1).[2] Over the next two years, Trench used her "Mourning Journal" to record her memories of her son, and to cope with her feelings of guilt and sorrow at his loss. Upon reading this diary for the first time in July 2002, I was struck by its sheer power as an artifact of the past. Although I had read many accounts of the deaths of children in early modern times, none were as raw and as emotionally engaging as Trench's little

1 Melesina Trench's five books of poetry are *Mary Queen of Scots, An Historical Ballad: With Other Poems* (London: C. Wood, 1800); *Ellen: A Ballad* (Bath: Cruttwell, 1815); *Compaspe, An Historical Tale; and Other Poems* (Southampton: T. Baker, 1815); *Laura's Dream; or, The Moonlanders* (London: J. Hatcher, 1816); and *Aubrey: In Five Cantos* (Southampton: T. Baker, 1818).

2 Trench, "The Mourning Journal," Hampshire Record Office (Winchester, Great Britain), record 23M93/13, p. 1 (my assigned pagination). References are to this document, to which I have assigned consecutive page numbers and the title "The Mourning Journal." I have added diacritical marks to the French quotations. Otherwise, the quotations included in this article are transcribed as they appear in the journal, though I was unable to reproduce the idiosyncratic spacing or changes in handwriting that are present in the actual journal entries.

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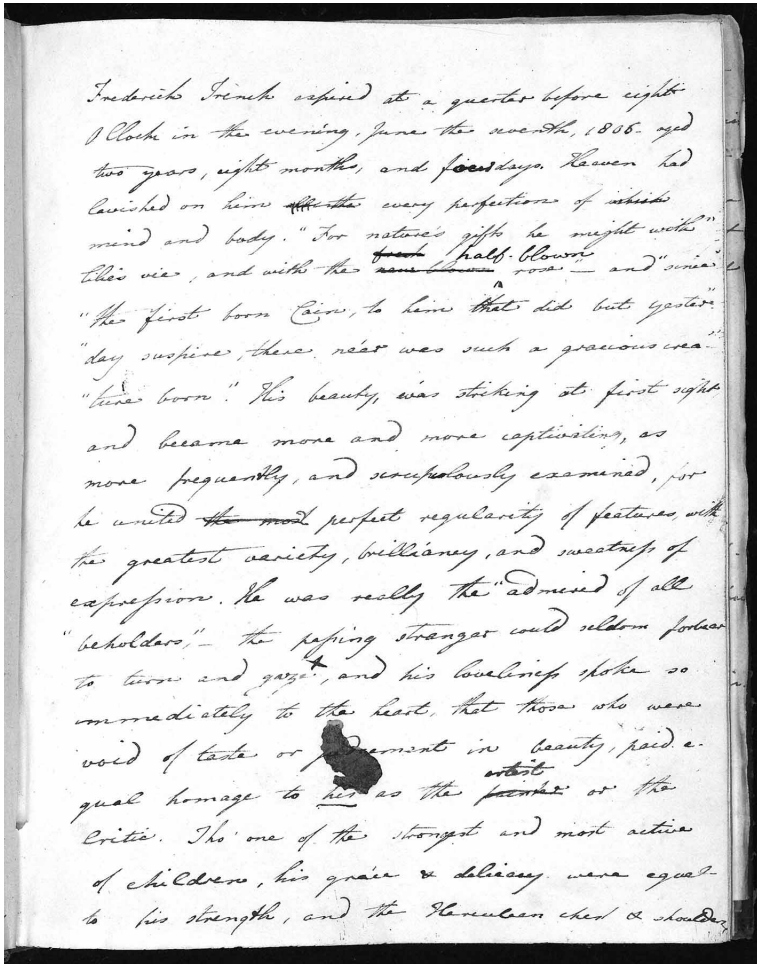

Figure 1. First page of the "Mourning Journal" of Melesina Trench. Reproduced courtesy of the Hampshire Record Office (image reference no. 23M93/13 fo.1r).

brown book. This journal holds special significance for literary scholars and social historians because it was written at a crucial time in the evolution of modern Western attitudes towards grief and the family.

Historian Richard Houlbrooke has stated definitively that, with regard to mourning, there is "no major contrast between the sensibility of the late seventeenth century and that of the late twentieth century."[3] Still, there is little doubt that this period—the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—saw a significant shift in the ways in which society allowed grief to be expressed. Born in 1768 and orphaned at age four, Melesina Trench was raised by her paternal grandfather, Richard Chenevix (1696–1799), the elderly Archbishop of Waterford, from whom she absorbed the eighteenth-century beliefs that the suppression of grief was "good breeding" and that refined women "respected those able to control and master their emotions, and looked down on those who could not."[4] Thus, it is not surprising that she retained some of this earlier period's view that grief was a "snare of impiety," and, specifically, that a mourning mother should not "let her thoughts dwell too long on her loss, to the prejudice of her body and soul."[5] In many ways, Trench resembles other eighteenth-century parents who, according to historian Linda A. Pollock, "found that their religious beliefs and parental emotions did come in conflict—although they firmly believed they should submit to God's will, they found it very difficult, if not impossible to do so."[6] Trench's responses were also influenced by the late-eighteenth-century cult of sensibility, which made "the almost wild expression of grief at the loss of a member of the family ... appropriate and laudable,"[7] and the advent of the Romantic era,

3 Ralph Houlbrooke, "The Age of Decency," in *Death in England,* ed. Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 187. For more on the debate over early modern "parental indifference," see Robert Woods, *Children Remembered: Responses to Untimely Death in the Past* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 7–32.

4 Janet Thaddeus, "Hoards of Sorrow: Hester Lynch Piozzi, Frances D'Arblay and Intimate Death," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 14, no. 3 (1990): 111.

5 Houlbrooke, 187.

6 Linda A. Pollock, *A Forgotten Child: Parent-Child Relations from 1500–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 131.

7 Julie Rugg, "From Reason to Regulation," in *Death in England*, 202.

which "brought a new sensibility to death ... a new impassioned, self-indulgent grief."[8]

Although Trench's attitudes were formed in the eighteenth century, her "Mourning Journal" was written in the opening years of the nineteenth century, a time that Philippe Ariès characterized as "The Age of the Beautiful Death," when profound mourning for the departed loved one was consistent with the belief in a future reunion after death, and death was depicted as an awe-filled and intrinsically beautiful event.[9] Dwelling on the details of a loved one's death became more acceptable, and people increasingly came to view the deathbed as "an opportunity to witness a spectacle that is both comforting and exalting."[10] By the Victorian era, mourners were supposed to find "consolation in writing lengthy family memorials on the life and death of the deceased, as a precious recollection for the family and as a therapy for the writer."[11] Whereas women of Trench's generation had been taught to suppress their emotions, a Victorian woman's mourning was "virtually a form of legal tender for 'respectability.'"[12] Victorian mothers who wrote (and published) accounts of their children's sufferings were celebrated for their exemplary faith and their selfless generosity. By 1861, when Mary Caroline Trench (Melesina Trench's daughter-in-law) published her pamphlet, *Little Richard, or, Notes on the Life and Death of a Dear Boy*, such documents were so plentiful that she felt the need to preface her work with an apology: "Under ordinary circumstances, I should have felt very unwilling to have any narrative, concerning a child of my own, added to the large and interesting number of such records already published."[13] In less than a century, the perception of the bereaved mother had evolved from seeing her as an individual engaged in a private

8 Robert Woods, *Childhood Remembered: Responses to Untimely Death in the Past* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 11.

9 Phillipe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 409–74.

10 Ariès, 473.

11 Patricia Jalland, "Victorian Death and its Decline," in *Death in England*, 246.

12 For a discussion of grief in the working class, see Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

13 M.C. Trench, *Little Richard* (London: Wertheim, Macintosh and Hunt, 1861), 1.

struggle against the "snare of impiety," to seeing her as the agent of her own grief, encouraged to craft a maternal mourning narrative to affirm her faith and to comfort other women.

Historically positioning Trench's "Mourning Journal" is made difficult by the predominant periodicity of previous studies. Extensive work has been done on maternal mourning narratives in the Victorian era, and one article examines the female expression of grief in the late eighteenth century, but no study has linked the prose writing of the mothers of Enlightenment sensibility to those of the Victorian cult of mourning.[14] Since no formal analysis of the shifts and continuities in the maternal expression of grief across this longer time period is available, I am comparing Trench's work to two specific texts: one that reflects eighteenth-century attitudes, and another that is part of the Victorian maternal mourning genre. Both mother-authors have been identified as representatives of the mourning attitudes of their eras: Hester Thrale (1741–1821) grieves her son Harry's death in 1776, and Catherine Tait (1819–69) writes about the deaths of her five daughters in 1856.[15] Comparing the three texts makes their common elements and individual differences apparent, showing how Trench's text reflects the social strictures of the earlier period and how it foreshadows the stance and structures of later texts. Perhaps even more important, placing Trench's "Mourning Journal" within the context of other maternal mourning narratives highlights Trench's personal innovations: her small and large additions and variations make this text not only a reflection of its time, but also a moment outside of time—a unique representation of one mother's grief at the loss of her child.

14 On maternal mourning narratives in the Victorian era, see Laurence Lerner, *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997); Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Barbara Z. Thaden, *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997). On the female expression of grief in the late eighteenth century, see Thaddeus, "Hoards of Sorrow."

15 Hester Thrale, "The Children's Book," in *The Thrales of Streatham Park*, by Mary Hyde (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977). Catharine Tait, *Memoir*, in *Catharine and Craufurd Tait: Wife and Son of Archibald Campbell, Archbishop of Canterbury: A Memoir* (1879; reprint, Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2007). References are to these editions.

Three Mothers Write of Dead Children

Although many late-eighteenth-century diaries and correspondences hold scattered descriptions of child loss, few extended accounts exist; Thrale's five diary pages devoted to the death of her son Henry in 1776 is one of the most fully developed accounts. Thrale's "The Children's Book" is a "little brown calf volume of 187 pages" focusing on the growth, education, and physical trials of her twelve children from 1766 to 1779.[16] The volume is wide ranging, celebrating the educational achievements of her children, documenting their illnesses and afflictions, and giving brief analyses (or criticisms) of their characters. Her description of Henry (Harry) in 1771 is typical: "four Years old—strong & healthy and very tall of his Age ... reads the Psalms quite smartly, seldom stopping to spell his Way; can repeat Grammar to the end of the Genders & knows a Subs. from an Adj.: in English or Latin perfectly well ... is manly to a most uncommon Degree" (44–45). The parts of "The Children's Book" recounting Harry's sudden death on 23 March 1776 and meditating on his loss contain many of the elements present in Trench's "Mourning Journal," but in a far more compressed form. Unlike the other two texts, Thrale's "The Children's Book" is a wholly private text, never intended for eyes other than her own.

Melesina Trench's "Mourning Journal," written from 1806–8, focuses entirely on Frederick's death.[17] For fifty-eight pages and just under 8,000 words, Trench uses original prose, quotations from published works, lists, and broken exclamations to record her son's death, create a memoir of his life, and cope with her grief and guilt. Part of the "Mourning Journal" could be considered semi-private (or semi-public) writing—intimate writing directed at another person—since fourteen of the first twenty-one pages consist of excerpts from letters that Trench wrote following Frederick's death. The rest of the "Mourning Journal" is non-linear, making no attempt to present a coherent narrative of

16 Mary Hyde, *The Thrales of Streatham Park*, vii. Thrale's "The Children's Book" was published as part of Hyde's extended biography of the Thrale family thirty-five years after the Balderston edition of *The Thraliana*.

17 After the death of Trench's second husband in 1860, her papers passed to her son, Richard Chenevix Trench, who edited them into one 525-page volume, *The Remains of Mrs. Richard Trench*. Published in 1862, *Remains* contains seven pages of material from the "Mourning Journal."

loss. In the journal's opening entry, the author's agony is reflected in the blots and crossed-out phrases that mar the pages as she tries to describe her lost child:

> When I have said he had skin of an animated fairness, or vermeuil-tinctured lip, a cheek ever rosy, but ever varying, the finest black eyes, shaded with long black eye lashes & softened by brows much, less dark, hair of a bright
>
> [here is a blank space, and then she starts again]
>
> I have said he had skin of the highest polish animated most delicate and true carnation, a vermeil tinctured lip, a cheek ever rosy, but ever varying. Bright black eyes, that seemed fed by a continual stream of light from within, eyebrows full and arched of a soft lovely brown, hair of the same color, but more light and golden shade. (1)

These early, Romantically tinged passages of the "Mourning Journal" provide a sharp contrast to the straightforward language and concrete descriptions of much of Thrale's "The Children's Book." Whereas Thrale tries to objectively analyze her children's intellects and personalities, Trench's journal begins by focusing on the physical reality of her son, and her need for a permanent image of him after his death. There is a palpable sense of physical longing in Trench's early pages.

Unlike the two earlier texts, which are primarily private documents, Catharine Tait's *Memoir* describing the deaths of her five daughters was written to be shared, first with her husband—"I read the account I had written to my dear husband last Sunday when we were quite alone" (255)—and then among a circle of "family and a few dear friends." Upon her death, Tait left a copy of the manuscript to her son with the suggestion that "it may be well for you to publish the little book ... it may speak a word of help and comfort to those upon whom a similar burden is laid, and who are feeling that it is too heavy for them to bear" (157).[18] Today it is considered "the longest and most detailed account of child deaths in the nineteenth century."[19] As a result

18 Tait's memoir was published in 1879 (ten years after her death) as part of a dual memoir, *Catharine and Craufurd Tait: A Memoir* which achieved instant popular success, selling 12,000 copies in the first year. The book went through another eleven editions in the next nine years, and was reprinted by Kissenger Publishing in 2007.

19 Lerner, 14.

of its public nature, the *Memoir* is a more polished text, intent on conveying the emotional reality of the children's deaths to its audience. Tait tells her story in chronological order, starting with an October 1855 reunion between parents and daughters: "We arrived at about nine o'clock at night and our darling Catty ran out to meet us full of the most intense happiness at our return ... We went up-stairs at once to see the little ones" (159). Even this first paragraph, an account of a joyful homecoming, is used to foreshadow the impending sorrow; Tait concludes the passage with "this was our meeting, and I did not part again from our darlings, until we were called by Him who gave them to part with them for ever in this world" (159).

Tait spends the first ten pages of the *Memoir* describing the daily schedule of the household and the events of the months preceding the girls' deaths. In these early pages, she presents an hour-by-hour account of each child's prayers, meals, lessons, and exercise. Throughout these descriptions, Tait makes statements that keep the reader focused on the girls' approaching fate, placing the coming tragedy in the context of their religious practices and beliefs: "She [Chatty] was the most artless innocent babe ... What will she, 'my earthly child,' as I used to call her, be like when we see her again?" (161). Tait's interweaving of faith and sorrow is one of the hallmarks of the Victorian maternal mourning narratives.[20] By this time, Tait was writing within an established tradition of maternal mourning, and so she constructs her text to fit into that tradition.

In contrast, Thrale and Trench had no models to follow for content, form, or tone, so their texts were crafted according to the authors' individual needs and personalities. Mary Hyde identifies "The Children's Book" as "apparently unique," and Trench's decision to devote an entire book to her dead son was similarly unprecedented in 1806.[21] Although both texts are clearly unpolished manuscripts designated as private writings, they are nonetheless innovative for the ways in which these women (both prolific writers in more conventional formats) used them to define and record their motherhoods.

The three texts' initial depictions of the lost children reveal differences in contemporary maternal attitudes. Tait's first

20 Lerner, 25.

21 Hyde, *The Thrales of Streatham Park*, vii.

pages describe her girls cheerfully performing their worldly and devotional duties, presenting the doomed children as part of a larger Christian community that will feel their loss. In contrast, Trench's initial mourning focuses on the physical beauty of Frederick, and Thrale's journal proclaims Harry's intellectual superiority and precocity. Placed next to the pervasive piety of Tait's *Memoir*, the earlier mothers seem "religiously incorrect," but their boastfulness is authorized by the private nature of their journals. Unlike Tait, the musings of Trench and Thrale are not shaped or filtred by literary conventions or social strictures. These differences echo to varying degrees in the common elements that the three texts share: 1) accounts of death, 2) depictions of the child's life, 3) valedictory celebrations, and 4) expressions of maternal guilt.

Accounts of Death

Hester Thrale's account of her son's death on 21 March 1776 is almost clinical in its attention to detail. The actual description, written two weeks after the event, documents the six hours preceding Harry's death and focuses on Thrale's response to her child: "there was Harry crying as if he had been whipt instead of ill, so I reproved him for making such a bustle ... presently, finding the boy inclined to vomit, I administer'd a large Wine-Glass of Emetic Wine which however did nothing any way ... seeing his sickness increase and his Countenance begin to alter, I sent out Sam" (151). Subsequent lines become even more detailed, making it clear that Thrale feels she is alone in her fight to save her son: "I plunged Harry into Water as hot as could easily be borne, up to his Middle & had just taken him out of the Tub, & laid him in a warm bed, when Jebb [the doctor] came & gave him 1st hot Wine, then Usquebaugh, then Daffy's elixir" (151–52). She records that following the initial crisis, "I was, however, all confusion, distress & perplexity, & Mr. Thrale bid me not cry so, for I should look like a Hag when I came to court the next day" (156). Immediately following this description of marital tension, Thrale gives an account of Harry's last moments: "soon a universal Shriek called us all together to Harry's Bedside, where he struggled a Moment—thrusting his Finger down his Throat to excite Vomiting, & then—turning to Nurse said very distinctly—don't Scream so—I

know I must die" (152). The entry has only one more line: "This, however I did not hear" (152). The entire scene is hectic, and the final image is of a mother too preoccupied with her own pain to listen to her son's last words. In these distressing passages, we hear more about the mother's actions and feelings than about her son's.

Hester Thrale's emotional detachment from her son was described by Janet Thaddeus as part of the way that she "hoarded her sorrow and her joy, and always held back on the love she gave," this is partly due to her self-absorbed and controlling personality, but it is also a response to late-eighteenth-century definitions of good breeding that effectively placed a "clamp on spoken and even written memory of the dead." Although the twenty-first-century reader may find Thrale's account of her son's death repellent, Thaddeus speculates that Thrale's writing "full and agonizing descriptions of the body in pain" was one of her "rituals to control grief and potential grief."[22] This entry makes clear that, within the context of the Thrale home, parenting was the sole responsibility of the mother; in Thrale's account, Mr. Thrale appears more concerned about social appearances than the danger threatening his son's life.

Melesina Trench's depiction of her son's death on 7 June 1806 highlights some crucial differences between Thrale's and Trench's journals. Trench presents the details of Frederick's last days through excerpts from four letters directed to: 1) her closest friend, Emily Agar; 2) her cousin Sarah "Sal" Tuit; 3) Lady Hutchinson, a social superior but intimate friend; and 4) Charles St George, Trench's teenage son from her first marriage. Trench's choosing to insert this semi-public form of writing into her private journal is intriguing; it may indicate her need for companionship in her time of sorrow, which is reminiscent of Esther Schor's view of eighteenth-century mourning as "a discourse among the living."[23] The opening lines of her letter to Lady Hutchinson are formal in tone: "It has pleased Providence to deprive me of my lovely Frederick, and I am so convinced you will sympathize in my deep distress, that I cannot deny

22 Thaddeus, 108, 113, 115.

23 Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Queen Victoria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

myself the relief of communicating a part of it" (15). In spite of her desire for sympathy, Trench is very much aware of the eighteenth-century dictate that women control their emotions, and she feels compelled to apologize: "I know the impropriety of pressing on your thoughts a subject so melancholy. We [Trench and her husband] feel so strong a desire that our lost child should be honored by the regrets of such a heart as yours, that we cannot refrain" (15).

These letters give the clearest descriptions of Frederick's death: "His disorder was a one and twenty days fever ... it slowly undermined him, and toward the close, was complicated either with the Croup, or an inflammatory sore throat, which spread itself to the lungs" (6). Although Trench describes the physicians' diagnosis, she does not detail the symptoms or the treatments as Thrale does. Her focus is on Frederick: his sensations and his ongoing relationship to his parents. Trench recounts how even when Frederick is blinded in the final stages of his illness, he remains an exemplary child. Trench writes to Emily Agar: "Thro' his painful illness he never once complained, except when tormented by Physicians. The malady itself never drew from him a murmur, but when he heard me cry, he used to stretch out his little hand, and say, tho' unable to see me 'pas vous pleurer, maman, pas vous pleurer' and within the last two hours, he, distinguishing his father's foot-steps, used to say, in his little faint voice, 'dans les bras de papa' and appear soothed when taken into them" (4–5). Similar remarks appear in the letter to Lady Hutchins: "He bore his malady ... like a little saint, with such a mysterious fortitude and sweetness that I am tempted, with all humility, to believe there may be minds where Providence is pleased to inspire those virtues which others must be taught" (17–18). Trench's depiction of Frederick's death bears a striking resemblance to the accounts of the "Lives and Deaths of Good Children," featured in the popular eighteenth-century Evangelical anthologies. These texts were modeled on earlier works, such as James Janeway's *A Token for Children, Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (1671). According to Paul Sangster, books such as Rowland Hill's *Instructions for Children* (1796) urged young children to prepare for their own deaths, so that they would "expire in a rapture of holy triumph" and be "taken by angels to dwell for ever with

the Lord."[24] Gillian Avery describes the highly stylized deaths presented in these texts: "The children bear pain and weakness courageously, they are aware of approaching death and welcome it."[25] Traditionally, the dying, exemplary children chide their grieving parents, requiring them to rejoice in their children's entry into heaven rather than mourning their death. While some aspects of Trench's work is in keeping with these texts—her emphasis on Frederick's courageous acceptance of pain and his desire to comfort his mother ("pas vous pleurer")—other aspects deviate from the genre. Trench's journal does not include graphic descriptions of affliction or long deathbed scenes, nor does she use the didactic tone of the "Good Children" texts. The central feature of her account is Frederick's relationship to his parents, not his relationship to Christ. She notes explicitly that "His only desire during his illness, was to be near his father and me" (18); dying, Frederick cries out for "les bras de papa," not for heavenly grace.

In these initial letters, Trench writes even less about her own emotions than Thrale does; she does not tell of her feelings when she learns of Frederick's danger, witnesses his decline, or watches him die. Trench consistently dilutes her personal response by recounting the emotions of both parents; she describes Frederick as "the solace of *our* captivity" (8), and tells how, as his danger intensified, "*we* lost all presence of mind, and knew not how to treat him" (6, emphasis added). When speaking for herself, Trench exhibits socially appropriate reticence, telling her correspondents that although she is "most miserable" she is "resigned [to the loss], for I acknowledge I deserve it" (4). Yet, to the modern reader, her resignation seems tenuous, since her choosing to copy four letters into her journal requires her to repeatedly recite the circumstances of Frederick's death. This repetition is in marked contrast to "The Children's Book," which compresses the events of Harry's death into two pages, and then moves forward to recount other days and different events. Trench seems compelled to dwell on the details of Frederick's death.

24 Paul Sangster, *Pity My Simplicity: The Evangelical Revival and the Religious Education of Children 1734–1800* (London: Epsworth Press, 1963), 53.

25 Gillian Avery, *Nineteenth-Century Children* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 214.

My consideration of Catharine Tait's *Memoir* focuses on her account of the death of her eldest daughter, ten-year-old Catharine, called "Catty." Like Thrale, Tait describes Catty's battle with scarlet fever in great detail: "He [the doctor] desired us to take her out of bed, and sponge her with vinegar and water. This we did, but the skin was burning and dry" (217). As in Trench's journal, the plural pronoun is prevalent throughout this narrative, emphasizing that Tait's husband plays an active role in nursing his children, and shares their mother's sorrow and agitation.[26] The description of Catty's death, the most extensive in the memoir, fills nine pages of close print. Unlike Trench, Tait is very open about her emotional response to every phase of Catty's illness, recounting her "terror" when Catty is taken ill, and her "agony" when her condition worsens. Tait also recounts her own moments of weakness: "All my strength left me; I felt as if I could not live without her ... I felt as if I could not go to her, all my strength of body and spirit were gone ... At length, God heard my cry for help, and gave me calmness and a little strength. I went over to her then" (220). Tait sees no impropriety in the depth of her feelings; she fears only that her sorrow will not allow her to minister to Catty's needs. The *Memoir*'s extensive description of Catty's illness and death are in keeping with the "Deaths of Good Children" genre, and Catty closely resembles the exemplary children as she prays with her mother and requests hymns and readings from the Book of Common Prayer. Like her didactic predecessors, Catty enacts what Schor has called "the fantastic drama of mortal transition performed on the deathbed";[27] she affirms her place in heaven and comforts her grieving parents:

> She[Catty] turned and looked with a look that we never can forget, at us, and then upward towards heaven, and pointed there distinctly with her finger ... and then with an earnestness no words can convey, stretched forth both her hands to be to be taken also, as if she saw, as most surely she did see, the angels waiting to convey her also to that place in the many mansions of our Father's house ... Her Father burst into floods of tears: she beckoned him to her, and stretching forth her dear hand she wiped the tears away, which she could never bear to see on his face, and tried every way to comfort him. (222)

26 Archibald Campbell Tait was Dean of Carlisle at the time of his daughters' deaths; he became the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1868.

27 Schor, 234.

In keeping with the "Beautiful Death," Tait describes the actual moment of Catty's "going" as she "winged her flight to heaven" (227). Like so many of the Victorian mourning texts, the Tait memoir never averts its eyes from earthly suffering, seeing in all things a testimony to the glory of God: "they are hours which burn into one's soul, and leave their heavy impress through all that remains of time; but no doubt, if Christ goes with us through them, they will produce blessed fruit to all eternity" (224). And yet, the text's adhering so closely to the conventions of its time does not detract from its emotional impact. Tait's ability to describe her intense emotions and her lingering sorrow without the formal phrasing or apologetic tone of the earlier narratives makes her memoir, as Laurence Lerner puts it, an "account that moves us so profoundly and tells us how deeply [she] loved and mourned [her] children."[28]

Depictions of the Child's Life

Following Harry's death, Thrale's entries in "The Children's Book" recount her subsequent concern for the health of her eldest daughter, and the family's efforts to "amuse our Sorrows & heal our half broken hearts" (159). It is not until 1 July, more than three months after Harry's death, that Thrale again mentions him. The entry begins with the news that she is pregnant, and reflects her belief that, due to the blow dealt by Harry's death, "I shall not remain here long enough to rear him [the unborn child]" (160). She speaks with longing about a heavenly reunion with her Mother and "my heart's dear Harry" (160). Then she says, "I will write down a Saying or two of his before I resolve to mention him no more" (160). Thrale presents five anecdotes, all of which culminate in Harry's making a remark that reveals his precocity, erudition, or piety. Her final anecdote reads: "On a more serious occasion—we had been reading; it was the 22nd Chapter of Saint Luke; & were speaking of Peter's denying Christ with so much Confidence.—Harry condemning him without mercy—Yet says I you must remember that this very Peter suffer'd Death for our Saviour's Doctrine, & that most willingly—I know he did replies Harry, but that was after he had receiv'd the Holy Ghost" (161–62). Thrale chooses

28 Lerner, 13.

to recall the moments in which Harry most closely meets the standards of behaviour she applied to her children throughout her journal. This entry reveals Thrale's sense of shame over her continuing grief, culminating in her resolution to "mention him no more" even in the confines of this private space.

In contrast to "The Children's Book," Trench's "Mourning Journal" never moves beyond Frederick's loss; even the birth of another son cannot distract Trench: "21[July]—on the 16th I was again a Mother—of a strong, healthy, and handsome boy—but the child of my soul is gone for ever" (40). In the more private pages that follow her initial letters, Trench feels free to "mention" Frederick over and over again. While Thrale's anecdotes of Harry last for 28 lines, Trench's recollections fill six pages. The personal nature of these pages is emphasized by their rawness; they show no evidence of editing or shaping, and have none of the polish of the four letters. Most of the vignettes are only one or two sentences:

> His favorite play was digging, making a garden, planting or—he used to work at this for hours, then come in rosy and brilliant apparently untired & say with such pleasure "Moi, bien travaillé"
>
> When out walking in the fields, his great pleasure was collecting "Marguerites pour maman, une quantité de Marguerites"
>
> Instead of a dislike to beggars on account of their dress & appearance, like most children, he seemed to have an instinctive love for the poor—and never failed to ask for money "pour la pauvre femme—le pauvre homme." (24, 24, 26)

Some of the differences between these sections of the two journals can be attributed to the difference in the boys' ages (Frederick is two; Harry is ten), but once again the mothers' different values are evident. Both mothers dote on their lost sons and want to remember them at their best; Thrale records moments of precocity, and Trench holds on to instances of generosity. Trench's greater number of entries and her wider-ranging examples show that she wants to remember her son in all of his daily activities; in the most private sections of her journal, Trench mourns for the childishness of her little son.

Also embedded in this private, rather mundane section, amid anecdotes of daisy picking and Frederick's fondness

for their elderly dog, is a scene from his deathbed, which Trench did not share with her correspondents: "Once in an inspired tone and attitude, pointing up to Heaven, in his last illness—'Là Haut, là Haut, là Haut, papa, Mama.' [on high, on high, on high, papa, mama]" (23). Trench interprets this cry as a sign of Frederick's awareness of a Divine presence —a characteristic moment in both the eighteenth-century "Deaths of Good Children" and the nineteenth-century beautiful death—but, unlike Tait, Trench keeps this supernatural aspect of her son's death private. She may have felt that it was inappropriate to share spiritual images or supernatural events with one's correspondents, or she may have felt that her son's words were a Divine message intended only for her. Some pages later, Trench writes "Perhaps you [Frederick] are permitted to protect and watch over me. To detach me from this vain world, and guide me to that you inhabit. Là-Haut—Là Haut, Là Haut" (32). It is significant that, unlike the exemplary mothers who are comforted by their "Good Children," Trench's mourning is not mitigated by Frederick's piety. She believes that her spiritual trial is to resist the lure of worldly things, not to struggle against the "snare" of sorrow.

In her depiction of Frederick's daily life, Trench seems closer to the Victorian view of childhood; as Laura Berry explains "Victorian writing tends to consider the child not merely as a symbol, but as a subject, focusing in greater detail and at length on his or her interior state and physical well-being."[29] The Victorian view is exemplified in Tait's description of her daughter's life. In the opening pages of the narrative, Tait shows Catty performing her daily tasks. The homeliness of these sections are reminiscent of Trench's vignettes depicting Frederick, but Catty, as the eldest of seven children, is rarely presented alone. Tait chooses anecdotes revealing Catty's care for the poor: "Catty and May requested at Christmas to make a shirt for a poor man whose daughter was blind; in a fortnight it was done and given by their own dear hands when the person came for it" (166); her guidance of her siblings: "Catty and Chatty sat upon two chairs side by side; the elder was helping the little one with some patchwork she was anxious to finish. A pleased and most sweet look of love

29 Laura C. Berry, *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 16.

lighted up the face of each" (173); and her piety: "Catty and May, in turns, would conduct a Sunday school ... Catty would always have some nice book to read which the little ones could follow" (164). Like Trench, Tait highlights Catty's relationships within the family and her performance of age-appropriate "good works." Here the purely public nature of the memoir shapes its contents; Tait does not waste space on reminiscences of her daughter that will not convince the audience of her perfection, while Trench privately seeks to remember even the most trivial aspects of her lost son.

Valedictory Celebration

In addition to the good qualities conveyed in the descriptions of the children's lives, all three of the maternal mourning texts contain specific passages that declare the superlative nature of the lost children. Thrale places her valedictory at the end of the 1 July entry, as though proving Harry's excellence will justify her continuing grief: "Now is not this a Child to grieve after? Is not this a Loss irreparable? Virtue, Health, Genius, Knowledge & perfect Bodily Proportions.—&now—all carried to the Vault all cold in the Grave & left to begin the World anew" (62). The standards that Thrale uses arise from the eighteenth-century view of children as "miniature adults." None of the characteristics that she lists identifies Harry as a child; all of his perfections are abstract qualities that an adult could easily exhibit.

In contrast, Trench's valedictory passage—though it echoes Thrale's central theme with the line "Now is not this a Child to grieve after?"—is written in a much different tone. Trench writes her valedictory passages in her four letters, placing them after her initial announcement of her loss and before her longer account of Frederick's illness and death. Unlike Thrale, Trench does not view her grief as shameful, but she does worry that celebrating one's child is inappropriate. Before the valedictory passage inserted into the letter to Emily Agar, Trench writes that she had not previously described Frederick's "uncommon sense or his exquisite loveliness ... from a just sense of the impropriety of boasting on any subject" (3), indicating that her new status as a mourning mother absolves her from the usual standards of behaviour. Trench writes to Lady Hutchinson:

> [he was] a most extraordinary child in all respects: There was something about him that touched the coldest hearts, and his preeminent beauty spoke as immediately to the feelings ... He united perfect regularity, to the greatest brilliancy and sweetness of expression, and the uncommon strength of his form took away nothing from its delicacy or grace. From the earliest power of distinguishing [he displayed]—a strong concern if any creature suffered—an impossibility of feeling resentment;—an indifference about himself, which made it often difficult to persuade him to his food,—a natural politeness,—a total freedom from fear,—and spirits so high, yet so sweetly restrainable by sensibility, that he seemed as if sent expressly from Heaven to be the solace of our captivity. (15–17)

Trench wants Lady Hutchinson to understand Frederick's special qualities, so that she will enter more fully into Trench's community of mourners. In her valedictory for her son, Trench seems guided by both the late-eighteenth-century concept of sensibility, and the Romantic emphasis on physical beauty and supernatural connection ("something about him"). And yet her celebration of Frederick as polite, selfless, and compassionate emphasizes his role within the family and his community and foreshadows the Victorian conception of good children.

Like Trench's journal, Tait's *Memoir* was written after the deaths of her children, so she can position her valedictory passages to maximize their effect on her readers. Tait's first valedictory passage is presented a few days before Catty falls ill, on her tenth birthday: "She had opened to be all that our fondest wishes could desire, and what a field of promise lay still before us! It is impossible to tell the help she had been with her sisters and dear Crauford,—how they were guided by her, and how gentle and sweet her influence was with them" (195). The second passage is positioned right after the discovery of her illness: "my first-born,—that child who had called forth within us all that can be called forth of heavenly love and happiness, —that child who had fulfilled our every wish, and who helped us with the others, and did her work in a way wonderful to contemplate" (211). Like Trench, Tait presents Catty within the family context, celebrating her not only as an obedient and compliant child, but also as a dutiful daughter and eldest sibling. The two authors likewise share in their use of these passages to enhance the foreboding and sympathy of their readers. Tait and Trench place them near the beginning of their narratives to

ensure that their readers will fully appreciate what is being lost. In contrast, Thrale's private journal places the valedictory after Harry's death, since her goal is to achieve personal solace for her sorrow rather than to evoke sympathy in her readers.

Expressions of Maternal Guilt

The final comparison that I will make between the three texts is the extent to which each mother expresses guilt or responsibility for her child's death. Many years after Harry's death, Thrale writes about him as part of an autobiographical retrospective in her *Thraliana*, the diary that Thaddeus called her "for-publication notebook" (116). The entry begins with "The Year 1776 was rendered a dismal one to me by the Death of my dear, my eldest Son" and proceeds to her "confession" of maternal guilt: "I was too proud of him, and provoked God's Judgments by my Folly:—Let this Sorrow expiate my Offences Good Lord! And through the merits of him who dried the Mother's Tears, as She follow'd her Son's Bier & Bid her Weep not! Suffer me no more to follow my Offspring to the Grave" (319). Thrale's interpreting Harry's death as personal chastisement from God is in keeping with other maternal mourning literature from the eighteenth century, and her expressing this belief in a journal that she expected would be published implies that she views such a confession of guilt as socially appropriate. This is in marked contrast to her earlier sense of shame when continuing to mourn Harry a few months after his death. Her greater freedom to discuss Harry in the *Thraliana* may stem from the fact that, due to the passage of time, she is *recording* a previous emotion rather than *expressing* her current feelings.

In contrast, the guilt that Trench expresses in her "Mourning Journal" stems from her sense of failure as a mother, rather than from a belief that she is being punished by God. In her opening letter, Trench tells Emily Agar that she is resigned to her loss because "I acknowledge I deserve it" (4): "I considered his illness to have originated from the carelessness of a maid ... and perhaps I was in part the cause, in having trusted too much to his acknowledged strength" (6–7). She does not confess this sense of guilt to any of her subsequent, less-intimate correspondents. Later, in the roughest, most clearly private sections of the

"Mourning Journal," Trench writes "I consider that my sins have been visited upon him [Frederick] and that I was the Author of them all" (30). In another entry, she precisely describes these "sins": "I wish every mother could hear the causes to which I attribute my Frederick's illness—in order to be warned against them—"

> Not considering his loss of appetite as symptomatic of disease.
> Suffering him to be attended by a person not accustomed to children
> Not changing his shoes & clothes when wet—but exalting in his strength at not showing any immediate bad effects from it—. (28)

She also expresses her guilt for "errors," "when his disease was confirmed":

> Calling in too many Physicians——
> Following their advice rather than our own opinion, after they had given him up ...
> Not persisting in <u>bathing his feet</u>,
> Forcing Physic [medicine] down his throat. (29)

Trench's focus on the pragmatic ways that she could have prevented Frederick's death reflects the changing role of medicine and the growing belief that proper medical treatment could prevent death. But the deeper cause of guilt in the "Mourning Journal" originates in Trench's critique of her own parenting: "[I] regret every hour I devoted to any other pursuit or society, while heaven spared him to me" (33). Although Trench's mothering practices were typical of women of her class and fortune, she writes "I should have disdained every frivolous occupation and amusement when compared to the duty of taking care of him, and the joy of his smiles ... I am now surprised how any thing seduced me from him. I hate work, music, frivolous books, indolence, and the long train of follies, which induced me ever to leave him to careless servants, uninterested in his health & happiness" (35–36). In these private passages, Trench rejects the social obligations and ornamental "accomplishments" appropriate for upper class eighteenth-century wives in favour of a system of values that resembles the Victorian "Angel in the Home."

In contrast, Catharine Tait, a Victorian woman leading a "saintly life" based on "deep piety ... effectual sympathy, untiring

labour," and the "exulting love of home, husband, and children,"[30] shows no evidence of maternal or spiritual guilt. She believes every aspect of her life is ordained by God. Even the Taits' bringing the children into contact with the deadly virus is God's will: "We went [to Carlisle] with rather anxious hearts, as we heard that scarlet fever was bad in the town; still, it was the path of duty, and we felt we ought not to shrink from it" (160). Throughout the children's illness, Tait accepts the aid of the physicians, but she sees the outcome as divinely ordained: "We watched and watched in silent agony, doing all we could, and still feeling that this precious gift was in God's hand" (217). Lerner notes that Tait's attitude is present in other Victorian mourning narratives that portray the "effort to accept death without repining, to believe that it would 'unchristian and ungrateful' to feel anything like discontent."[31] Tait knows that she and her family live their lives according to God's wishes: "Thus were we called upon to part with these five most blessed daughters, each of whom had been received in prayer, borne in prayer, educated with prayer, and now given up, though with bitter anguish, yet with prayer and thanksgiving" (243).

Beyond the Maternal Narrative Tradition

The comparison of Trench's "Mourning Journal" with Thrale's "The Children's Book" and Tait's *Memoir* shows how Trench's journal fits within the tradition of maternal mourning narratives from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, alternately exhibiting characteristics of both the earlier and the later texts. Like Thrale, Trench feels the need to present a public face of emotional control; she celebrates the extraordinary aspects of her lost son and experiences a strong sense of maternal guilt. In contrast, Trench and Tait share a need to depict their child's "Beautiful Death"; they portray their husbands as co-parents; and their texts dwell on the everyday, "childlike" aspects of their children. As the latest and the most public piece of writing, Tait's *Memoir* crafts the images of her sorrow and the story of her loss to evoke the sympathy of others. Thrale's wholly private

30 William Benham, "Preface," *Catharine and Crauford Tait, A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1882), vi.

31 Lerner, 25.

text is less scripted in its emotional outpourings and meets the author/mother's need for expression and memory, without considering the response of future readers. Trench's semi-public entries (her letters) exhibit a control of language and conscious presentation of material that is similar to Tait's, but, since she is writing fifty years earlier, Trench feels it is inappropriate for her to share her personal memories of her son or the spiritual aspects of his death with even this intimate audience. Trench continued the "Mourning Journal" for thirty-six pages beyond her semi-public letters because certain aspects of her sorrow could only be expressed in private.

The later pages of the "Mourning Journal" contain clear, unbridled expressions of sorrow often mingled with quotations from literary sources. Trench further distinguishes these private sections of the text from the semi-public letters by choosing to write many of the most desolate passages in French: "C'est ce jour-là que j'ai reçu le dernier soupir de mon enfant. Pourquoi le son de l'airain a-t-il pris quelque chose de si lugubre? Chaque fois qu'il retentit j'éprouve un frémissement involuntaire ... Chaque coup l'éloigne de moi: chaque instant qui s'écoule repousse vers le passé l'instant où je le voyais encore, le temps l'eloigne, le dévore: ce n'est plus qu'une ombre fugitive que je ne puis saisir, et ces heures de félicité que je passois près de toi sont déjà englouties, par le néant!" (46). As the journal progresses, Trench clearly feels increased isolation in her grief. Although her husband's sympathy is portrayed in her opening letters ("Mr. Trench is nearly, perhaps wholly, as wretched as myself"), the later, private sections reveal her sense of abandonment: "You [Frederick] are now forgot, or nearly so, by all but me" (31). Trench's letters indicate her desire for a community of mourners (an eighteenth-century idea), but her later feelings of desolation resemble the Victorian trope of the isolated mourner.[32]

Unable to gain complete sympathy from another person, Trench turns to literature to find a reflection of her feelings, incorporating excerpts and quotations into her journal. A significant portion

32 According to Schor: "By the accession of Victoria, emphasis had begun to shift away from the mourner's participation, through sympathy, in the social fabric, toward the social recognition and patronizing of the individual mourner" (11).

of the "Mourning Journal" (fifteen pages) contains excerpts from other people's writing.[33] Sometimes these citations are in the form of pages-long excerpts from narrative poems; in other entries, the quotations are integrated into Trench's own writing. Trench's insertion of quotations and her interweaving of English with French creates a fragmented, stream-of-consciousness style that reflects inner turmoil:

> Death and my Frederick. I have no power of connecting these two ideas—was he not all vivacity, strength, bloom, & beauty. Had he not a superabundance of that animating spirit we call life. It may seem that "it was safety to be near him, and in his form to clasp perfection" [Thomson, *The Seasons*]
> Quand j'ai visiter pour le première fois la chambre qui a été sa dernière demeure, quelle vide! Quelle silence! Je l'ai quittée, j'y suis revenue, je l'ai quitté encore,—j'ai erre dans la maison pour me sauver de moi-même
> —Often in that room I involuntarily turn towards the glass which reflected his last looks, and expect to find there some outline, some trace, some shade of him. But
> "He is gone, and my idolatrous fancy
> Must consecrate his relics" [Pasquin, "Tears of Ierne"]
> what lies [here]? One poor solitary lock of shining hair,—the little simple clothes that he embellished—not a picture—not an image of that loveliness unparalleled. (50)

This entry demonstrates Trench's practice of mixing material from works that are now part of the eighteenth-century canon (Alexander Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" [1736], Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* [1742–45], and James Thomson's *The Seasons* [1746]), with quotations from "poems of sentiment" that were popular at the end of the eighteenth century but are unread today, including Anthony Pasquin's "The Tears of Ierne" (1789) and Cuthbert Shaw's "Monody to the Memory of a Young Lady " (1770). Throughout these pages, Trench quotes only passages that replicate her misery, rather than any that affirm faith or look to future joys. This quotation pattern is in keeping with Trench's narrative techniques in the earlier parts of the journal that enhance rather than relieve her suffering. In his landmark study *The English Elegy* (1985), Peter M. Sacks writes about the "work of mourning"

33 Trench further drew material from the Bible and from French works by La Bruyère, La Brugne, Tevigne, Mme Collin, and Hatier.

that the author of an elegy performs: "He has renarrated and accepted the fact of death. He has ironized and surpassed inadequate modes of grief. He has expressed and purged his anger. He has submitted to a chastening power that deflects his own attachment to the dead and to the mother-Muse."[34] In contrast, Trench, though deeply invested in renarrating and accepting Frederick's death, has no desire to purge her anger or in any way loosen her attachment to her dead child. Unlike both the Enlightenment and Romantic elegists, she seeks expression, not consolation. Trench's final journal entry, written 15 March 1808, reads:

> One bitter remembrance, one sorrow throws its black shade alike on our joys and woes, To which times nothing brightness or darkness can bring. For which joy has no balm, and affliction no sting. There seems to be a physical, as well as a moral effect in the return of the season, the month, the day, the hour on which a beloved object was torn away from us. We know that many disorders of the body are providential. Why may not the violent pains of the mind bear some analogy to them. Those tempests of sorrow which tear everything up; every pleasure by the roots, and sweep away the very soil where new ones might have sprung, leaving nothing but the bare cold rock behind (57–58)

The "Mourning Journal" ends with these words—no summary, no period, no end to Trench's desolation. Although Trench gradually moved beyond her all-consuming grief, the "Mourning Journal" is never appended, amended, or corrected.[35] Her defiant inconsolability is an expression of sorrow that was unacceptable according to the Enlightenment, Romantic, and Victorian standards for maternal mourning. In Trench's raw final pages, we find a precursor to the modern elegists whom Jahan Ramazani describes in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*: "They are like the Freudian 'melancholic' in their fierce resistance to solace ... they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in

34 Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 165. This particular passage is written in reference to Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais."

35 For an account of Trench's later descent into depression, see Hampshire Record Office documents Ref.23M93/28/49; Ref.23M93/28/59; and Ref.23M93/28/105.

poetry itself ... instead of curing themselves through displacement, modern elegists 'practice losing farther, losing faster,' so that the 'One Art' of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it."[36]

Perhaps, more than anything else, Melesina Trench's "Mourning Journal" reminds us that we must not be complacent in our acceptance of historical (or literary) descriptions of emotional fashions or social trends. Within the journal, Enlightenment and Romantic images co-exist with attitudes that seem consistent with Victorian and twentieth-century beliefs, reflecting not only the complexity of this moment, but also the inevitable variations of individual expression. Consumed by the intensity of her personal experience, Melesina Trench becomes a woman who utilizes many traditions of sorrow, but is ultimately more attuned to her own grief than to any social strictures.

Although all forms of mourning arise from a particular time and place, the extent to which they remain valid outside their original contexts varies widely. Tait's *Memoir*, written with an eye to its eventual audience, was exactly in touch with the contemporary attitudes of 1879, and was both lauded and preserved. Thrale's less-crafted, personally focused "The Children's Book" was not considered to be of interest until the late 1970s, after the feminist movement and increased interest in social history made the domestic concerns of an eighteenth-century woman seem worthy of publication. Trench's "Mourning Journal," never published in its entirety, has not yet found a place in our historical/literary vision, but its semi-public/private format makes it uniquely suited to convey both the period's social face of maternal mourning and its most intimate reality of motherhood and loss.

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36 Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.