

Empty Hands and Precious Pictures: Post-mortem Portrait Photographs of Children

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In an 1882 article on ‘A Grave Subject’, the photographer George Bradforde wrote:

How the relatives can bear to look upon these photographs I cannot understand, unless they have a peculiar love of the horrible. For my part I cannot see the necessity of photographing the dead at all. If the departed were truly beloved, nothing that may happen in this world can ever efface the dear features from the mind’s eye: it needs not a cold, crude photograph representing the last dreary stage of humanity to recall those lineaments. Indeed, I should imagine it would in time lead to the forgetting of the pleasant smile or the lightsome laugh, and supply, in place, a ghoul-like resemblance of anything but a pleasant nature (394-5).

This sums up the reasons why photographic portraits of the dead are no longer widespread. Such images would today be viewed as ghoulish and morbid, and a photograph of a dead body now strikes us as bearable only in the form of news images in which horror is the main thrust of the story. Such pictures bear witness to the obscenity of violent death: they are a necessary record of atrocity rather than the portrait of a dead person.

Victorian photographs of the dead, however, were for the most part not those of murders or victims of war; they were family members, most commonly children, who had died at home. They are not news photographs distributed widely among strangers, but portraits, commissioned by family members and kept in the home. It is these pictures that George Bradforde is describing, and his reactions were shared by many in his trade. Though articles appeared in the nineteenth-century photographic press from time to time giving advice on how to handle the technical challenges of such commissions, many practitioners viewed them with distaste, as Audrey Linkman has shown (309-15). Yet accept them they did, for numerous examples of postmortem portraits do survive, the vast majority being of infants and small children. The grieving families who wanted a photograph of their dead child must have valued such images and found them precious comfort. Indeed, as Pat Jalland has suggested, post-mortem portrait photography was one of a number of practices associated with mourning highly valued in Victorian culture: “External symbols represented the physical memory of the deceased, which was especially important in the ‘searching’ period of grief, following the shock of death. ... photographs, portraits or drawings of the recently deceased, sometimes lying in the coffin, were another common form of remembrance which brought comfort to the bereaved family, however macabre they seem to some late-twentieth century eyes” (“Victorian Death” 246).

This essay asks what kinds of comfort might be found in a photograph of a dead child, and in it I seek to place the post-mortem portrait photograph in the context of the

Victorian emotional, material and visual culture of death. In particular, I will show that photographs of dead children were thought of as beautiful, and that they were part of a discourse of consolation which offered succour to parental grief through an evocation of the physical qualities of the dead child. The Victorians, I will argue, looked at pictures of their dead children in order to feel again “the pleasant smile or the lightsome laugh” (Bradforde 395). In the silence of unutterable grief, images recalled the physical presence of a dead child and taught mourning parents to feel some consolation for their loss. Robert Pogue Harrison has suggested that death masks, painted portraits and photographs of the dead have played an important part in the process of mourning from classical antiquity to the present because they are records of the “person who has vanished” from the corpse, which is but a “lifeless likeness of him or herself.” He argues that “before the living can detach themselves from them the dead must be detached from their remains so that their images may find their place in the afterlife of the imagination” (Harrison 148). I think Harrison is right that post-mortem portraits did help bereaved parents continue loving their children in the “afterlife of the imagination,” yet his account treats photographs as pure image, as do most of those who discuss the relationship of photography and death (Flint 5). Yet photographs are also objects that are made, exchanged, displayed and hidden, and this is often forgotten in accounts of photography, such as Walter Benjamin’s famous characterisation of photography’s “optical unconscious”, which focus on the world photography shows us (Benjamin 243). As Geoffrey Batchen has remarked, “in order to see what the photograph is of, we must first repress our consciousness of what it is” (60). In this essay I argue that the ‘what-it-is-ness’, the materiality of the post-mortem photograph, is central to its ability to console. Though it has become taboo, touching the dead is a persistent theme of consolatory literature, which emphasises the physical qualities of the dead person’s, especially the dead child’s body. Preparations for the funeral, which were normally conducted at home, meant that the body was held and cared for, and these loving touches are recorded in the image. The photographs themselves, as objects, invite touch, and became miniature substitutes for the dead child whose image they recorded. As such, they filled the empty hands of the bereaved parents who mourned their dead children. They helped them to feel that their children were not lost to them, for they were, in a significant way, still there among the living.

I shall start by showing how these themes are played out in relation to one photograph before going on to discuss them in more detail. “Alfred Owens laid out after death” (fig. 1) is a *carte-de-visite* photograph of an infant lying on an upholstered armchair. He has been ‘laid out’ for burial: he has been washed and his hair combed, and he has been dressed in a clean white nightgown. His head is propped up by pillows, which may also help to keep his mouth closed as his chin rests on his chest, and his arms have been placed by his side, above the blanket which has been laid over him. At first glance, it seems as if Alfred has been posed so as to give the impression that he is asleep. Yet a closer look makes it obvious that this is not so. Whereas at first it seems as if Alfred has been laid on a couch or sofa, the moulding on the wood in the bottom right hand corner picked up by the light from the window shows that this is an armchair, and that consequently, the child’s legs must be supported by another chair cut off by the angle from which the photograph is taken, and disguised by the blanket. The patterned



Figure 1: Alfred Owen Laid Out After Death (London, Victoria and Albert Museum)

wallpaper visible below the windowsill suggests that Alfred is lying in a parlour rather than a bedroom, for expensive wallpaper would have been reserved for rooms that might have been seen by visitors. Finally, the intricate shawl, with its lacework pattern of maple leaves, which has been arranged on the back of the chair and is the main visual feature of the image, would surely have been reserved for best: if worn at all, only on the most important occasions, and usually kept folded away to stop it yellowing and fraying, or kept in the parlour whose curtains were normally drawn to preserve the precious furnishings within. The arrangement and props in the photograph, then, show clearly that Alfred has been laid out as if sleeping, but that this arrangement would have been understood by all who had seen him as a convention. No child sleeps in a parlour; and although the detritus of the deathbed would have been cleared away, it is unlikely that Alfred died here. He has been moved, laid out for viewing and burial in the grandest room in the house, and though the photograph respects the convention of ‘not dead, just sleeping’ it is clear that Alfred really is dead.

Alfred’s face is a little over-exposed due to the long exposure the photographer probably used and the light from the window reflected by his white clothing. His eyes are closed, the features serene. He has probably been photographed fairly soon after his death, before the skin started to yellow (which would have registered as dark pigmentation in the photograph) and the lips to blacken, and while his face still wore the peaceful expression conveyed by the relaxation of the muscles after death. The most obvious sign that he is dead is that his closed eyes are sunken; his eyelids would have been weighted as he was laid out to keep them from opening as the muscles contracted again with rigor mortis. Apart from this, however, his face is indistinguishable in death from sleep, and the impression conveyed by the photograph is that of untroubled slumber. Indeed, the photograph has been arranged in order to convey this impression, yet Alfred is also unmistakably dead. The reality of death has not been denied; rather, a particular idea of what death is like has been pictured. As Jay Ruby notes in his study of post-mortem photography, such ‘last sleep’ poses show that there was an “excellent fit between technology [that is, the processes involved in early photography] and ideology” (73).

The chair on which Alfred rests has been placed near a window, perhaps by the photographer in order to use what natural light was available. Photographers who wrote about post-mortem portraiture in the photographic press frequently stressed the need for light and recommended, if possible, moving the body close to a window (Linkman 333-5). But the light from the window has the clear symbolic meaning of ‘light from heaven’. Even if the dead child’s proximity to the window has a practical purpose, its symbolic connotations would have been easily evident to the photograph’s first viewers, for the window lighting a darkened interior with both real and symbolic light is repeated over and over again in well-known and widely reproduced paintings. A famous example is William Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1853, London: Tate Britain), and a similar window also appears in John Everett Millais’ *The Artist Attending the Mourning of a Young Girl* (fig 2), in which Millais shows himself being commissioned to draw a post-mortem portrait. In this painting the window appears in the top right hand corner of the picture, behind the girl’s head, and clearly suggests her heavenly destination.



Figure 2: John Everett Millais, *The Artist Attending the Mourning of a Young Girl* (Tate Gallery/Digital Images @ Tate London 2009)

The image of Alfred is small: cartes-de-visite photographs were mounted on pieces of card only 2.5 x 4 inches large. The carte-de-visite photograph was developed in the 1850s by Antoine Disdéri, whose invention of a camera that could take multiple images on one plate led to the a huge reduction in the price of photographs. Cartes de visite were so-called because their size was close to that of a visiting card, but they were most often collected and placed in albums. Cartes attained a huge popularity through the 1850s and 60s, when photographs of the famous sold commercially for as little as one shilling. Studies of the carte-de-visite craze often focus on this aspect of carte photography, yet it was also hugely popular for family portraiture, largely because it was so cheap. Cartes-de-visite, and their slightly larger successor, cabinet photographs, were collected into family albums and recorded family members and occasions such as christenings and marriages (Newhall 64-71). Historians of family photography such as Audrey Linkman have noted that post-mortem photographs are only very occasionally found in such albums as survive, although there are suggestions that post-mortem portraits may have been circulated among friends and relatives in the same way as other carte-de-visite or cabinet portrait photographs were (Linkman 342-7). The lack of pictures of the dead in

family albums, and the scarcity of these photographs compared to other family pictures which survive in great quantities, has suggested to many that in fact post-mortem photographic portraiture was very rare compared to the popularity of the practice in Europe and America. Yet photographs of the dead do survive, and it is entirely likely that changes in social attitudes to and rituals of death have meant that many treasured photographs have been thrown away and destroyed by later descendants. Alfred Owen's picture is remarkable because it has survived: it is the only post-mortem portrait in the Victoria and Albert Museum's extensive photographic collections. In its time, though, it may well have been commonplace.

There is another respect in which Alfred's picture is commonplace, of course, for most of those photographs of the dead that do survive are of children. Alfred Owens was ten months old when he died: just a baby, small enough indeed to lie stretched out on an armchair. In one sense, he is ordinary, one of the hundreds of thousands of babies who died before their first birthday. (Although infant mortality figures are hard to gauge accurately because of anomalies in the ways deaths were recorded, those given by Jalland indicate the scale of death in childhood and infancy. Jalland cites infant mortality figures of around 150 per 1000 for each of the decades between 1850 and 1900, and adds that the deaths of infants and children accounted for a quarter of all deaths recorded in this period (*Death* 120).) But though Alfred's death is one of thousands, to those who commissioned his photograph (most probably his parents) he was precious and unique. The existence of the photograph is a testament to the love they felt for him, for who would want a picture of a child they did not care about? It may be that more post-mortem portraits of infants and children than adults survive because many children died before they had been photographed: their post-mortem portrait was the only image left of them. But the existence of these photographs is also a testament to the agony of grief felt by the child's parents, and the special nature of their bereavement.

In a letter from 1850, the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell vividly described an encounter with a portrait she had recently seen of a dead infant: "Over the door being an exquisitely painted picture of a dead child perhaps Baby's age, – deathly livid, and with the most woeful expression of pain on its little wan face, – it looked too deeply stamped to be lost even in Heaven" (112). The baby had suffered terrible burns and died of them, and the effects of its dreadful sufferings on its countenance had been faithfully depicted by the artist, for instead of "the quiet lovely expression of angelic rest" she expected, the face was instead stamped with "the look of despairing agony" (Gaskell 112-13). Gaskell was not shocked to see a post-mortem portrait on the wall of the house she was visiting; it was the aesthetic and moral values of the picture that horrified her. She expected a portrait of a dead child to show it at peace, as if sleeping, and she would have found such a picture lovely, full of transcendental significance. She might perhaps have been thinking of an image like William Windus's portrait of his dead son (fig. 3), which shows the infant tenderly wrapped in an adult's – perhaps his father's – fur coat, and with a small bunch of violets tucked into his tiny, just-seen hand. The artist has left a touch of red on the baby's lips, and though his skin has the pallor of death, the cheeks are underpainted with pink so that they appear slightly rosy. These warm tones are picked up in the tawny orange of the



Figure 3: William Windus, *Portrait of a Dead Child, the Artist's Son* (Tate Gallery/Digital Images @ Tate London 2009)

waistcoat he is wrapped in underneath the coat, and which curves round his head, and in the green wall behind the piece of inlaid furniture to the right. The child's face is at the centre of the image, and the swathes of cloth and coat wrapping him serve to frame it, directing the viewer's gaze to its tiny features. The picture is intensely poignant: the chill of death is emphasised by the fur coat and the contrast between the child's closed eyes and pale skin and the luxuriance of the fur and fabrics surrounding him. The picture must have been painted, or at least started, in the first hours after death, so in one sense its point is the intensity of grief to which it gives visual form. Yet there is also an aesthetic at work here, for the careful arrangement of contrasting colours and textures surrounding and framing the dead child's face emphasise that we are meant to find it beautiful: not only the picture, but also the dead child.

The expectation that a child's corpse will be beautiful was central to Victorian practices of mourning and remembrance, and underpins the wish to have photographic, drawn or painted portraits made of the recently dead. One important source of normative Victorian ideas about death is consolatory literature, which was produced in enormous quantities, especially during the middle decades of the century. Volumes of consolation for bereaved parents with titles such as *Words of Comfort for Parents Bereaved of Little Children* (1861) or *A Cypress Wreath for an Infant's Grave* (1845) were produced in great quantity, each often running to several editions. The topos of the beautiful dead child is central to these books, and is repeated over and over again in the letters of condolence, sermons and poetry collected in such volumes. Here is one example, from a poem called "On Viewing the Dead Body of a Beautiful Infant":

There is a smile upon that cheek –

Those lips would seem almost to speak;
 Calm is that look, that brow is fair
 The flaxen ringlet wantons there!
 And well those features sweet we trace,
 Which hover on that angel face;
 He seems enrapt in slumbers deep –
 Ah, loved one! 'tis thy long, last sleep. (Bunce 57)

As Jessica Roberts points out in her discussion of consolatory anthologies, the repetitiveness of the elegies contained in these books is central to their purpose, for it encourages a process of “hollowing out the figure of the dead child, emptying it of any individual identity so that it might serve as a conduit of grief”(147). In this poem the dead child’s beauties have an almost standardised, universal quality: the calm look, the fair brow, the smiling cheek, the angel face, the sweet features.

It is clear from looking at descriptions of individual dead children that such beauty was not universally seen. For example, Rev. George Gilfillan, describing the deathbed of a “young friend” says that “death is often a ghastly disguise, a dread mask, reminding you of an ill-executed picture. But *she* was so calmly beautiful, so spiritually still, so smilingly radiant amidst her marble coldness” (Logan 113-14). Seeing the dead as beautiful was something that had to be learned. Linkman quotes a fascinating passage from Ellen Buxton’s diary which shows this process at work. In this entry, Ellen describes being taken to see her dead brother and reveals her struggle to see it ‘properly’, that is, as beautiful:

Mamma told us that she wanted us to go and see dear Leo before he was put into his little coffin ... he was lying in the large bed, and he looked so beautiful and so perfectly at rest; but he did not look at all like himself when he was alive, he was so changed I should not have known him I am sure ... and so very handsome his lips were very dark purple nearly black, and he had a sort of yellowish hue all over his face ... Papa told us to remember his dear face all our life & to look at him intently he did indeed look lovely, and just as though he were asleep; because his beautiful large brown eyes were shut (Linkman 338).

Leo’s face is both horrible and beautiful: Papa teaches Ellen to see that the horror is superficial and the beauty the true reality. The mourner who looks upon a dead child must learn to see past the early signs of decay, the marks of disease, or the ravages of the death agony, to the ideal beauty which is the true reality and will form the basis of their remembered image of him or her. This process of tutored looking is given visual form in post-mortem photographs, in which every effort is made to emphasise that what is pictured is a thing of beauty. The picture of an unknown infant by the Welsh photographer John Thomas illustrates this well (fig 4). (The image is a modern reprint from an original glass negative which has been damaged; the original print would not have been so disfigured by markings.) This was taken at low angle in order to maximise



Figure 4: John Thomas, *A Dead Child* (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales)

what little light there was on the baby's face, and so incidentally shows that the lids are not completely closed over the eyes as they would be in sleep. Nevertheless, it is clear that the infant has been carefully arranged for the photograph: his hair has been brushed and he has been dressed in best clothes and laid carefully upon the pillow. The picture of Tobias Milne (fig 5), which has been cropped into a vignette around the child's head and shoulders, once again shows that it has been carefully arranged in order to focus on the beautiful child. In this case, the shadows created by the light from the right side emphasise the roundness of the child's face, the texture, the still-shiny hair swept back from his forehead, and the long eyelashes, the shadows of which can be seen on his cheeks. Though his lips are rough, a sign of the ravages of dying, the play of light and shade and the close up view of his face superimpose the ideal of the child's beauty on top of the effects of death.

The careful posing and lighting of this photograph, and the inscription at the bottom of the card, 'W S Attwood Photo Pentonville Road N', remind us that, though the dead child's beauty was in the eye of the beholder, the look that saw the beautiful child was the look of love. Yet the hand that wrote 'In loving/ Memory of/ Tobias Milne/ Born Jan[uary] 26th 71/Died March 10th 1875' (fig. 6) on the reverse of this card was not the same one that took the photograph; the image was made by the agency of a professional photographer who had no loving relationship with the living child to render him beautiful, or to transform his manipulation of the corpse into an act of kindness and care.¹ The relative rapidity of photography made his contact with the corpse, and indeed the family, fleeting, unlike the artist who would have spent some hours in the company of the family while making a picture. Millais's emotional involvement with the family of the dead girl whose picture he was commissioned to paint impelled him to record the scene of the commission: "the scene moved him so much that when he got home he made this sketch showing himself being asked to draw the girl's portrait" (Rosenfeld and Smith, 33). It is no wonder, then, that photographers tended to see post-mortem portraiture as grisly, much as we do today, for the dead were not made beautiful for them by the eyes of love.

Yet though it is important to recognise that post-mortem photographic portraits of children were thought of, and were intended to be thought of, as beautiful, this does not fully account for their place in Victorian mourning practices, because it would be equally possible for the dead child to be made beautiful through all sorts of media: as we have seen, in paintings and poetry, through diaries and other writings, drawings, memorial sculpture, and so on. What is it that is specific to photography that gave such images their special appeal? Elizabeth Edwards has drawn attention to the photograph's materiality, particularly in the context of its importance as a "conduit of memory" (221). Whereas much photography theory (most influentially Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*) has highlighted the problematic referentiality and the troubled relationship with realism of the photograph as central to its special qualities, Edwards suggests that its materiality should be seen as essential to its mnemonic power. Rather than viewing a photograph as 'pure image', she suggests that we need to see photographs as objects which "can be handled, framed, cut, crumpled, caressed, pinned on a wall, put under a pillow, or wept over" (Edwards 226). Furthermore, they are objects which "demand tactile engagement": as one



Figure 5: W. S. Atwood, Tobias Milne (courtesy of Paul Frecker)

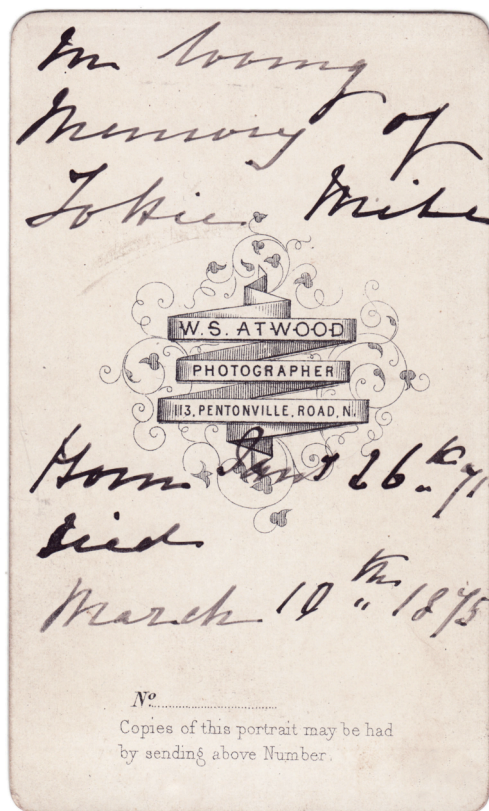


Figure 6: 'Tobias Milne', verso (Courtesy of Paul Frecker)

looks through a photograph album or through a packet of photographs, one feels compelled to touch, even stroke, the images and through this touching, “the viewer is brought into bodily contact with the trace of the remembered... tactile in experienced time” (Edwards 228). When you touch a photograph of a person, you touch the trace of their presence. As Patrizia di Bello has commented, the photograph is “a trace that bypasses the image maker and goes directly from the sitter to the hand holding the photograph” (86). Your hand, caressing the surface of the image, moves through time in a gesture of remembrance, invoking both the desire to touch the pictured person and the memory of doing so. The tactile quality of photographs is also evoked by the social practices surrounding them: looking through a photograph album with another person requires that you sit next to, perhaps touching them; handing round photographs to look at involves a series of touches, hand to hand, as the images are exchanged.

The tactile quality of the photographic object is perhaps even more evident in the form of the *carte-de-visite* or cabinet photograph, for the fragile paper prints were pasted onto cardboard mounts in order to preserve them, giving them a certain weight and stiffness, yet their small size (2.5 x 4 inches for a *carte-de-visite* or 4.25 x 6.5 inches for a cabinet photograph) mean that they could be held in the palm of the hand. A photograph of a tiny dead baby could be cradled in the hand just as he or she could have been held, while alive, in the crook of one arm. The photograph is a small, substitutive image of the baby, and evokes a similar desire to hold and protect in the viewer.

One of the difficulties in understanding the meanings of post-mortem portrait photographs is that few of them survive, despite some evidence that the practice of taking them was fairly widespread. A major source for historians of family photographs is family albums, yet few albums containing Victorian family photographs have post-mortem portraits in them. One possibility, of course, is that they might once have been there, but have been subsequently removed as they came to be seen as morbid and disgusting rather than moving and beautiful. Or they might have been framed and displayed and later thrown away, or hidden, in family bibles, drawers, wallets, locketts or pockets. Some may have been transformed into relics by combining them with other mementoes: Julie-Marie Strange has found an example of a photographer who mounted “the image of the child ... onto a matchbox with ‘lovely little scrolls’, sometimes accompanied by a memento, perhaps a piece of hair” (215). Such objects are like relics, treasured traces of the past whose meaning is woven into the fabric of the domestic space in which they are kept but which in time lose their devotional quality and “return to the ordinary, indeed disposable object, the detritus of material culture, as they cease to have meaning for the living beyond a generalised ‘pastness’” (Edwards 226-7). This trajectory from intensely meaningful, treasured, touched object to meaningless rubbish helps explain why so many of these photographs have disappeared, for the complex of memories and feelings which made them so precious has grown distant and faded as time has passed.

The memories evoked by post-mortem portraits are intensely, poignantly affective, and the tactile quality of these photographs is central to their affective pull. Susan Stewart has

commented that of all the senses, touch is the most closely connected to emotion and feeling: “to be ‘touched’ or ‘moved’ by words or things implies the process of identification and separation by which we apprehend the world aesthetically The pressure involved in touch is a pressure on ourselves as well as upon objects” (31). When we touch something, we are also touched by the thing we touch; feelings flow back and forth between ourselves and the object. In particular, Stewart suggests, the back-and-forth-ness of touch is central to legends, such as that of Pygmalion, about the giving of life. When Pygmalion reaches out to touch his statue, life flows from him to the statue and love flows back. This reciprocity between toucher and touched also underpins the mnemonic power of objects such as photographs, partly because photography is itself a tactile medium, formed though the impression of light in a chemical emulsion and produced through the contact of negative and printing paper, and partly because the impulse to touch a photograph therefore involves touching a trace of the past. It is not only the contemplation of the image that produces the emotions which give photographs their extraordinary affective power but the tactility of the photograph as object. We touch, and are touched.

Recapturing this aspect of the photograph’s affective quality is central to understanding the place of post-mortem portraits in Victorian mourning practices. It is a mistake to think that most of the bereaved found consolation in expressing their feelings through words. The introduction to *The Mourner’s Solace: A Devotional Anthology* (1836) contends that while grief is often thought of as “exhausting itself in complaint ... real grief silently endures, until its dreadful energy is abated. Silence is the natural expression of that awful and overwhelming sensation which presses upon the soul in the moment of bereavement” (2). In her study of working-class grief, Strange has argued compellingly that silence, not articulating or displaying one’s feelings, was an important strategy in working-class mourning, and this is an important corrective to studies such as Jalland’s, which draws upon the papers of a number of middle- and upper-class families who wrote copiously about their experience of bereavement (Strange 195). Accounts of bereavement can tell us much about the emotional lives of the articulate and educated; but what of the feelings of those who left no writings behind?

One way of imagining these feelings is to look at mass-produced consolatory literature, for this can give us a sense of the ideas about grief and its commonplace topoi that were in circulation in the period. Jessica Roberts has argued that such anthologies were both “testaments of grief and training manuals for the grieving”, economic ventures that shaped the experience of grief in their own image in order to expand the market for their product (147). It is true that these books were produced through the agency of the market, yet Roberts’s argument implies a comparison between mass-produced, repetitive and ‘inauthentic’ consolation literature, offering ready-made accounts of what grief and love feel like, and the authentic and original expression of feeling and experience to be found in personal accounts and elite literature. However, to those without the wherewithal to write their own elegaic poetry, compose their own letters of condolence, or commit to words their own agonies as they watched their children die, such literature must have been a conduit for articulating their own feelings. In a sense, they found in these books ready-made words for feelings that otherwise might not have been articulated. Elegies

and letters of condolence included in such anthologies normally follow a typical pattern, in which the child's beauty is described, his or her death is mourned and the bereaved parent's loss bewailed, ending with the parent's yearning to meet their child in heaven. Far from the repetitiveness of this convention dulling the feelings the elegies in these anthologies evoke (for this reader at least), they grew more real as they were repeated over and over again.

Central to many of the poems included in anthologies such as *A Cypress Wreath for an Infant's Grave* or *A Word of Comfort for Parents Bereaved of Little Children* is the idea of touch. Hands recur time and time again: death is figured often as stretching out his hand to touch them and claim them: the anonymous writer of "My Lambs" describes "laying [her child] down/ In those white arms" (Logan 337). The memory of touching the living child, and the love felt and conveyed by such touches, is an especially painful recurrent topos. In another anonymous poem, the parent rejects the consolation of imagining his or her child in heaven, crying instead:

Ah! the parents think of this!
 But remember more the kiss
 From the little rose-red lips
 And the print of finger tips

Left upon a broken toy
 Will remind them how the boy
 And his sister charmed the days,
 With their pretty, winsome ways (Logan 364).

The ghost of Pygmalion haunts many of these poems, which invoke the sculptural qualities of the child's dead body, such as these lines from "The Dead Infant" by Mrs CB Wilson:

Here might the sculptor gaze, until his hand
 Had learned to fashion forth yon lovely thing,
 Pale as the chiselled marble ...

The still calm brow – the smile on either cheek –
 The little folded hands – the lips apart,
 As though they would the bonds of silence break
 Are they not models fair, meet for the sculptor's art? (Bunce 59)

The word "hand" appears in each stanza: the sculptor's imagined hand touching the infant, and the tiny folded hand that will never reach out to touch. Together these two hands invoke the idea of an impossible, Pygmalion touch in which the infant is brought back to life. Of course, such poems also evoke funerary monuments such as Francis Chantrey's *Sleeping Children* (1817, Lichfield Cathedral), which was also famously celebrated in a much-anthologised poem by Felicia Hemans. Finally, many poems include a description of the loving touches involved in laying out a body, and of the last,

despairing caresses by the bereaved parent, such as this excerpt from a harrowing poem called “Home Trial” by James Hedderwick:

They took his form of innocence, and stretch'd it out alone;
Tears fell upon the pulseless clay, like rain-drops upon stone;
They closed his eyes of beauty, for their glory was o'ercast,
And sorrow drew its deepest shade from gladness that was past.

...

His coffin-crib a soft hand deck'd with flowers of sweetest scent;
To beauty and decay akin, living breath they lent;
But never could they breath impart whence other breath had flown; --
Ah me! affection's helplessness, when death has claimed his own!

...

No more might fair hands fondly smooth the pillow for his head;
The joyless task was now all mine to lay him in his bed:
I laid him in his earth-cold bed, and buried with him there,
The hope that trembling on its knees expired 'mid broken prayer. (Logan 293-4)

This poem is so intensely moving because it gives voice to the despair of the mourner that touch can never bring back the beloved child, all the loving hands that care for him can do no more than lay him in his coffin and into the cold ground: the primary bond of touch between parent and child, the touch that initiates the love between them, is forever broken. In her *Words of Cheer for Mothers Bereft of Little Children* (1887), Mrs Prentiss ends an agonising account of the deaths of two of her children in the space of a month with a cry of desolation: “Empty hands, empty hands, a worn-out, exhausted body, and unutterable longings to flee from a world that has had for me so many sharp experiences. God help me, my baby, my baby, God help me, my little lost Eddy” (Prentiss 118).

When a child dies, his or her parents are left with empty hands, and elegaic poetry and other grief-stricken writings give voice to the yearning to touch that is such a large part of what Don Cupitt has called our “impossible ... excessive, objectless, irrepressible love for the dead” (14). Love for the dead is impossible, says Cupitt, because we cannot bridge the eternal separation of death. Yet the Victorians in their mourning did try to cross that gulf, in the imagined encounter with their dead children in heaven, through consolatory writings, letters of condolence, mementoes and relics of the dead, and through post-mortem photographic portraits. I see these Victorian mourning practices which now appear to be so morbid and inauthentic as helping the bereaved to cross the gulf of death and to form an “internal representation”, a continuing bond with those children of whom they lost so many (Klass 211). Expressing the desolation he felt after his son's death, James Hedderwick wrote:

The world is emptied of my child, yet crowded with his loss;
The silence and the vacancy my steps for ever cross;
With every sound of merriment my sorrow is at strife,
And happy infants stare at me like pictures wanting life. (Logan 295)

In contrast to the portraits of their beloved dead children that bereaved Victorian parents held in place of the living child, the “happy children” they saw around them appeared “like pictures wanting life.” Mourning practices, communal rites and experiences such as grave visiting, letters of condolence, and reading elegiac poetry all helped Victorian parents to feel that they were not eternally separated from their dead children, and that they still held them in their hearts; and so it was with post-mortem portraits. A tiny photograph, small enough to hold in a hand or hide in a pocket or fold of clothing, which could be taken out and looked at, wept over, stroked, talked to, kissed, held against one’s breast, helped Victorian parents to feel that the world was not entirely silent and vacant, empty of the life of their beloved child. The portrait of their beautiful infant helped them to carry his or her image inside, to cross the eternal separation of death with a continuing love, and to feel that they went hand in hand with their dead child towards the future.

Notes

¹ The name ‘Tobias Milne’ is suppositious. The owner of this photograph, Paul Frecker, has made strenuous efforts both to decipher the inscription and to identify the child in birth and death registers, but has so far been unable to do so. ‘Tobias Milne’ is his best attempt to decipher the name in the inscription.

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