

**Matins, 24th January 2016, King's College Chapel,
Cambridge, 10.30 am**

**'Women of Spirit': the Unseen World of Margaret
Benson**

...the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. Deut.30.14

“The whole world had darkened to a uniform tint...The woman who stood there could hardly say whether this tint were brown or grey, for there was no colour to contrast it with...if she leant over the parapet she could not see the water, but where she believed it to be, something like the shadow of a ripple moved across the dusk.

“And as for want of contrast she could determine no colour, so for want of distance she could determine no size. All she saw could be enclosed by four small walls; all she could not see might reveal miles of river-bank, streets of stately houses...No such monotony of existence could be conceived; a world of shadows, an Isle of Voices, would be life itself to this. And yet she believed herself to be standing in the heart of the greatest city in the world’.

So begins Margaret Benson's short story 'The Unseen World', published in 1913, five years after her family had confined her to an asylum for the mentally ill. Its perspective is a woman's, standing

upon Westminster Bridge in a pea-souper. It was probably written at some point between 1902 and 1907 - round about a hundred years after the seeing eye of Wordsworth's sonnet saw from the same spot the City wearing, like a garment, 'the beauty of the morning...all bright and glittering in the smokeless air'. It is difficult to imagine a starker contrast to the blind confinement of this imagined figure leaning out from the bridge to catch 'the shadow of a ripple' on the water in the smoky dusk.

Benson was not exactly writing a story. The piece is a deliberate parable of the human condition in relation to religious faith, a situated illustration of the extent to which our ordinary living is as much underpinned by faith as by empirical observation, written by someone who had received the training of an Oxford philosopher. Benson's unnamed woman believes not only in a 'present invisible' but in a 'future uncreated; that she should presently return from where she stood to her own house, the fragment of visible world opening before her and above her, closing behind her as she went'. It lacks the economy of Bede's sparrow speeding through the feasting hall, but its point is related: that all that may be seen relies upon our faith in the unseen, held to by knowledge, by memory, by trust and by report. The last thing the woman sees is a white bird,

both clearly a London pigeon and as clearly the Holy Spirit, undefeated by the darkness crowding to comprehend it.

I find this gallant venture to articulate what she called 'living by faith in a blank world' peculiarly touching. At the point where it came into print its author was effectively silenced - both externally, in that she had been removed from ordinary civil society and institutionalised, and internally, in that her faith had left her. I do not only mean her faith in God. With it went her faith in the solid nature of things in general. Faces in London streets were suffused with darkness; out on a rare jaunt in London with her brother Arthur she worried that the road behind the carriage was dissolving into mist and nothingness. She had lost her bearings. Her letters home from the asylum are largely destroyed, so the extent of her mental illness and even the details of her breakdown are entirely described by others, and in very varying terms, from the lurid to the rather sad and ordinary. All that remains are letters *to* her, largely from her mother, sometimes annotated in pencil in Margaret's hand: 'No'. 'Not true'. 'It wasn't like that'.

This brilliant woman, one of the first to graduate (though of course without a degree) from Lady Margaret Hall with the highest First

of the year in PPE in 1886; this woman, an extraordinary member of an extraordinary family, the Bensons, the clever, difficult and unhappy children of Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury and crafter of the 'Nine Lessons and Carols' service for which this College Chapel is most famous; this woman, first Egyptologist to conduct her own dig of the Temple of Mut in Karnak in 1896; this woman, who brought the 'Lambeth Diploma in Theology' into existence and ran, for women, the 'St Paul's Institute for Biblical Study'; who saw in herself a spiritual calling which could not find its outlet and attempted a great work arguing for the existence of God, *The Venture of Rational Faith* - this remarkable woman spent the last years of her life in bitterness and confusion, lost to herself and spending her time in bedrest and bits and pieces of 'carriage exercise' until her death, in 1916, at the age of fifty-one. (Her doctor and tormentor, Sir George Savage, was to treat Virginia Woolf with as little success. He is famous for comparing educated women, in print, to force-fed geese.) Her burial service, in the small churchyard of Addington, near Croydon, in June 1916, had as silent spectators the wounded soldiers of the First War, inmates of the hospital which Addington Palace had become.

There is much more to Margaret Benson than a sad story of Edwardian frustrations. She is a forgotten part of the journey towards recognising women's vocation to the ordained ministry. She campaigned for decent theological training for women, on the very reasonable ground that they did almost all the Sunday school teaching, and if it was bad then children were being badly taught the elements of their faith. She was seriously considered for the Mistress-ship of Girton College, though she became ineligible on health grounds. She almost certainly ghost-wrote all the theological sections to her brother A.C. Benson's official biography of their father, and she edited Edward White Benson's commentary on Revelation, *The Apocalypse*.

In a famously gay family, she may possibly have shared with her father the unhappy distinction of being heterosexual, though she did have a very close relationship with a female companion, Nettie Gourlay. But she does not speak of her female friendships in quite the terms that her mother and sister did, and seems to have yearned for intimacy with at least one eligible curate. As she grew older her great venture to bring faith back to the grasp of what she called 'the average man' became subject to slippage, and she

started referring to it, with increasing irony, as 'B.W.' (Benson's Works).

It is not easy to bring back any clear vision of what it was to be Margaret Benson - what she thought, or felt, or wrote. After her death her brother Arthur, by then Master of Magdalene College here in Cambridge, wrote a heavily censored version of her 'Life and Letters', burning the originals of all her correspondence in the college furnace as he went. (The effort cost him his own sanity, though not his Mastership of the College.) Margaret Benson's is an unseen world. The glimpses tantalise - 'If you see my dear little Hegel anywhere about (if no one wants to read it as a devotional book) you might bring it with you' she writes, aged eighteen, to her sister from Oxford. Years later, exasperatedly, she writes to her mother, 'the real difficulty is that none of the Benson brothers *can* stop writing. They are like the wild huntsman'. Her tone ranges from confident to cowed, from amused to desperate, and all in fragments.

And yet her supervisor said of her that her intellect was one of 'absolute remorselessness' and lamented that no one would know how able she had been or how well she had done. Her book, *The*

Venture of Rational Faith, is extraordinarily lucid on what one can and cannot say about the relation between faith and rationality.

“The most fruitful cause of unbelief’ she writes, ‘is not that faith conflicts with what we have learnt to be true, but that it seems to have no connection with what we know to be real’. Acerbically, she observes that ‘Reasonless as much of our faith often is, the popular difficulties which assail it are yet more irrational; least reasonable of all is the position of those who will study neither the difficulties of faith nor the grounds of belief, but let a vague faith be assailed by a yet vaguer doubt, and hardly wait to fight with shadows before they fall or flee.’ Yet she was also clear that the route to faith was available to all, regardless of their intellectual gifts: that ‘the word’, if it was to be found at all, would be found ‘very near to you...in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe’ (Deut.30.14).

Margaret Benson has been dead for a hundred years. On the night of her breakdown she wrote to a friend, quoting Browning’s

Paracelsus:

If I stoop into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time ; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast ; its splendour, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom : I will emerge one day!

She seems to have hoped to emerge in life, and from the gloom of mental illness. That mercy was not accorded her - though she was granted two days of lucid joy and restored faith immediately before her death - but like all God's children she rests in peace to rise in glory. The year before her death she engaged, with characteristic clear-mindedness, with the debate on praying for the dead which the carnage of the First World War had brought about: 'When we pray for the dead', she asked, 'for what do we pray?' She received no answer, but perhaps our prayer for her today in this place and time may be the ancient one:

Rest eternal grant unto her, O Lord;
and may light perpetual shine upon her.

Amen.