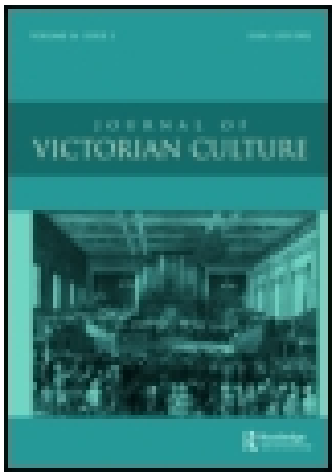

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Childhood in Victorian Art

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the books by Abrams and Lavalette, some date in the Victorian period is seen as a useful starting point for an analysis which extends to the present. Other scholars, most influentially the collection assembled by Roger Cooter in his *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare, 1880-1940* (London: Routledge, 1992) have pointed to the period 1880-1920 as one in which the modern relationship between child, parent and state was formulated and put into practice. Publishers like 'Victorian' – it seems less cumbersome than 'nineteenth-century' – but it carries a heavy baggage. Separated as we now are by more than a century from the Victorians, it may be time to disconnect the adjective 'Victorian' from children and childhood – but not of course to cease to study children and childhood in the nineteenth century. For it was then, as many of the books discussed here demonstrate, that many of our modern ways of thinking and acting had their roots.

Endnotes

1. Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race: Constructing Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary Schools of Victorian England, 1880-1914* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2000).
2. Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, '"The exploitation of little children": child labour and the family economy in the Industrial Revolution', *Explorations in Economic History*, 32 (1995).
3. Thomas Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working-Class Culture 1780-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976).
4. 'Willingly to school: the working-class response to elementary education in Britain, 1875-1918', *Journal of British Studies*, 32 (1993): 111-38.
5. Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 128-39.
6. Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, 117-29, Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, 157-61.These themes have been further explored by Anna Davin in 'Waif stories in late nineteenth-century England', *History Workshop Journal*, 52 (2001): 67-98.
7. See, e.g., W. Clarke Hall, *The Queen's Reign for Children* (London, 1897).

Childhood in Victorian Art

Caroline Arscott

Victorian attitudes to children were complex and subject to change as economic conditions, religious attitudes and educational policy changed. In a culture marked by the gulf between the wealthy middle class and the impoverished working class the experience and expectations of childhood were quite dissimilar for the comfortable upper ranks and the indigent lower classes. Middle-class families had, by and large, one set of assumptions about their own children and another for the factory children or street children who remained on the margins of

consciousness. From time to time, however, grim social conditions came to the attention of the middle classes and there was sudden shock and outrage, for instance when the treatment of pauper children was dramatised by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (1837-8), or the conditions of chimney sweeps by Charles Kingsley in *The Water Babies* (1863). The conditions experienced by children working in mines were highlighted by the 1842 government report on Children's Employment, and the details of the struggle to survive on the streets were published by Mayhew in his reports to the *Morning Chronicle*, gathered in *London Labour and the London Poor*, in 1851 (reissued and expanded in 1861-2). When the Children's Employment Commission report was published in 1842, its illustrations showed children pushing the corves or carriages along in the tunnels that were too low for pit ponies or donkeys. The images and the condemnatory comments of the Report caused an immense sensation and contributed to the introduction of legislation to limit working hours for children in mines and mills.

> Chained, belted, harnessed like dogs in a go-cart, black, saturated with wet, and more than half-naked – crawling upon their hands and feet – they present an appearance indescribably disgusting and unnatural.[1]

Several commentators have picked up on the way the Commission report was preoccupied by the sexual impropriety of the nakedness in the pits and the way in which its readers were disgusted by what they took to be evidence of the sexual precociousness of the child workers.[2] In Mayhew's survey of street folk there is an image of a young match seller (fig. 1). The girl is shown clutching a box of lucifer matches in one hand and a tattered sack in the other; she is dwarfed by the street bollard, and has the unmodulated shape and tottering stance of a very small child. Mayhew says

> It is not uncommon, in the quieter roads of the suburbs especially, to see a young woman extend her bare red arm from beneath a scanty ragged shawl, and with an imploring look, a low curtsey, and a piteous tone, proffer a box of matches for sale; while a child in her arms, perhaps two or three years old, extends in its little hand another box. There are also in the street sale of lucifer matches very many girls and boys, parentless or uncared for, and many old or infirm women and men.[3]

The child shown in the image is older than the infant described as precociously echoing the gesture of the mother from the mother's arms, but we can't imagine that she is very old. Mayhew puts the limit of childhood at fifteen, or 'the age of puberty', because after that, he says, criminal tendencies are confirmed; before fifteen the child is still

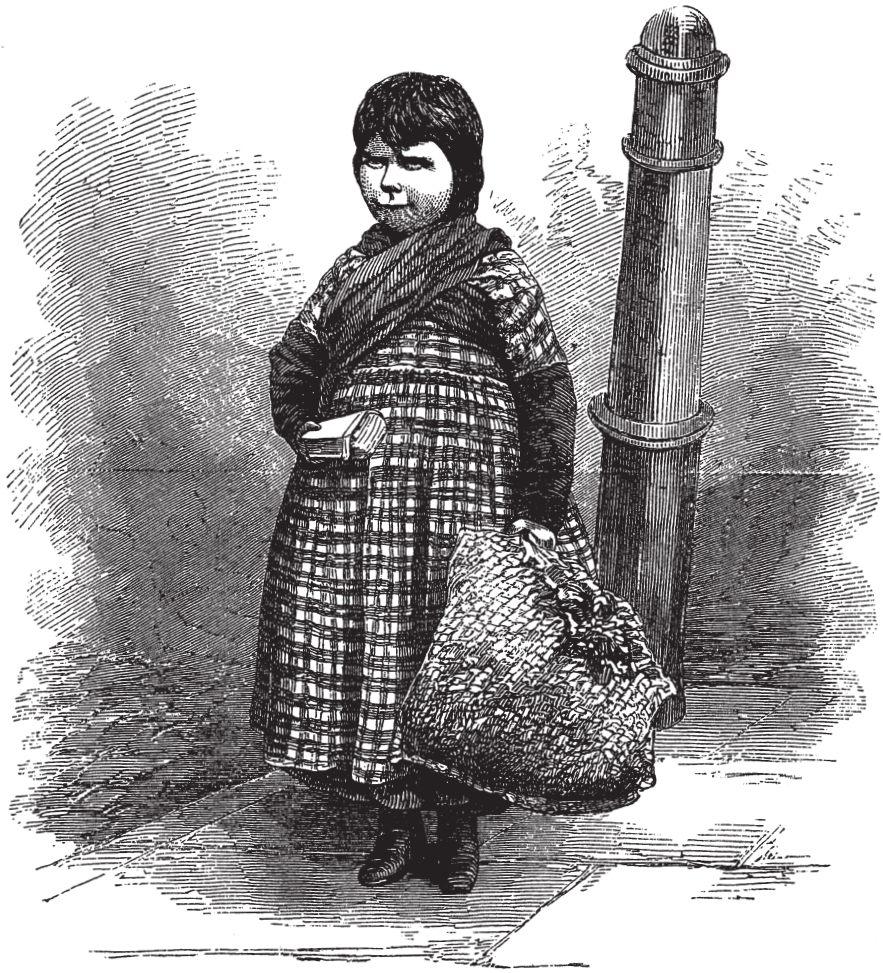

Fig. 1. Mayhew, 'The Lucifer Match Girl', after a daguerreotype by Beard, from H. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1851.

amenable to moulding of character by friends or parents. Coster-children may display criminal tendencies, riotous bravado, deceitful roguishness, obdurate indifference, but the fault is in their environment, he says, which hardens them and encourages these tendencies.[4] In the Royal Commission report and in Mayhew's reportage the viewer or reader is made to feel pity for the deprivation of the children, but is also made strongly aware of the evil propensities that might be brought

out by hardship and neglect. The subject of the child provokes an emotional reaction of affection and nurturing care, but the rush of warm feeling is modified by anxiety concerning the moral standing of the child. If the somewhat shapeless form of the child could be shaped to malefaction; if the child's blamelessness could nonetheless incorporate tendencies that could lead on to stealing, cheating, rebelling or fornicating, then the image of the child could not straightforwardly occasion sentimental feelings.

I would contend that there was an undercurrent of concern about the malevolence of children even in representations of middle-class children. Mayhew's formulation is very helpful. He claims that young children are blameless, any blame must lie with their parents, or, as he points out, with the State for failing to look after them. But he does not claim that children are innocent. Innocence is something very different from blamelessness. Mayhew gives us the idea of an unfocused propensity for evil.

My argument ties in with discussions about the way a late eighteenth-century/early nineteenth-century Romantic notion of the *innocence* of childhood gave way to a Victorian notion of innocence-under-attack, or innocence-slipping-away. This has been articulated by several authors, notably by James Kincaid, Robert Polhemus and Anne Higonnet.[5] It forms part of Malcolm Warner's essay on Millais's child subjects in an exhibition catalogue of 1999. He considers in particular Millais's *Autumn Leaves* (1856), in which all the children seem sunk in thought and strangely detached from one another. He points out that 'From the clearly doom-laden *Autumn Leaves* to the most unassuming, symbol-free portrait, the remarkable feature of Millais's child paintings is how lacking the children are in merriment, mischievousness, and all the livelier traits we normally associate with childhood. Seldom do they laugh, smile or play; for the most part their expressions are serious, tending towards sadness'.[6] The apple, held by a small girl in Millais's picture, speaks of sin, mortality and suffering. The evening light, the autumn decay and the consignment of the variegated leaves to the funereal pyre speak of endings and destruction too. Malcolm Warner argues that for the Victorians the idea of innocence always brought with it a nostalgia for the passing of innocence and attributes the wistful melancholy of many of Millais's child subjects to this nexus of ideas. My emphasis is a little different. By adopting the idea of blameless malefaction rather than the fragile innocence I think I can give an account that encompasses both the comedy and the poignancy of Victorian child subjects.

Millais was one of the foremost painters of children in the Victorian

period. He became famous in later life for appealing single figure pictures of solemn children: *Cherry Ripe* and *Bubbles* are still well- known today. In the 1870s and 1880s *Cinderella* (1881), *Princess Elizabeth* and *Sweetest Eyes* (1881), *Pomona* (1882), *Little Miss Muffet* (1884), *Perfect Bliss* (1884), *Lilacs* (1886), and *Penseroso* (1893) were all well-known and much admired in certain circles. Millais was greatly in request as a painter of child portraits too. The painter Val Prinsep recalled that Millais loved to watch children at play. 'He loved to watch the children playing in Kensington gardens, and the Long Walk nearly opposite his house was a sure place to find him on summer afternoons. "They are the most beautiful things in this world." he said to me one day as we sat and watched. "What subjects to paint!"'[7] Millais was renowned for his own ebullient high spirits and was said to have retained his own boyishness to the end (he died aged 67 in 1896).[8] His liveliness helped him to entertain the child models who sat for him; he told fairy tales as he painted and was said to have a supply of dolls, picture books and chocolates in the studio for them.[9] We should not forget that he and his wife Effie had eight children and many grandchildren. His children, nieces and nephews and grandchildren provided the models for many of his paintings.[10]

Genre painting dealt, traditionally, with humble life though by the late 1850s middle-class genre scenes had become more common. Throughout the Victorian period the antics of children were a special focus of interest, and we can identify child genre scenes as a kind of subset of genre painting. Its specialists were Webster, Hardy and Houghton among others. Thomas Webster was a perennially popular specialist in child subjects, who exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy. He painted a pair of paintings in 1842, *The Smile* and *The Frown*. In these pictures rustic boys of various ages, one not out of pinafores, sit on a form in a village school. Smiling good humour gives way to tears, long faces and watchful glances. Webster was especially valued for his ability to depict variety of character and for the humour of his scenes. The pair of pictures is effectively a before and after, and it is the wrath of the schoolmaster that has effected the transformation. The fine fish which had been brought out for admiration has been put back in the bag. The boy with toothache who had forgotten his troubles enough to enjoy an apple now nurses his sore jaw. The slate that was being cheerfully held up at one end is, in the second picture, being agonised over, further down the row. The dunce who had crept up to join in the fun has been cuffed on the ear and sent back to his lesson. The rebellious older boys now whisper behind raised primers, wary of being caught. Webster shows sympathy for the boys, their joys and

sorrows, he does not exactly take the schoolmaster's punitive view, but a moral framework of idleness and industry is nevertheless in place. The whole point of the pair is that boys are irrepressibly mischievous – though the two scenes are opposite they are both equally true to the naughty nature of the boys. This reversal without alteration is funny, and the comedy mitigates any unease that the immorality (idleness, greed, lack of respect) might arouse. We are allowed a surrogate pleasure in the boy's exploits and we can access the energy and inventiveness of the lads.

Frederick Daniel Hardy is another artist who delighted in the chaotic, amusing activities of children at play. For instance in *Try this Pair* (1864) he showed the wholesale disruption of the domestic scene when a travelling spectacles salesman calls and unpacks his box of samples on the table in a cottage interior. Grandfather tries a pair to read the newspaper, a daughter tries some encouraged by her sister, the mother is busy, perhaps fetching refreshments. Meanwhile the little boy has seized a pair and his mischievous side leads him to don the spectacles and grimace at the toddler causing terror, the baby in the cradle is intrigued and threatens to topple over the end of the crib, as her doll has done. On other occasions Hardy allowed the children to monopolise the action as they played at being grownups. We see children playing in *The Young Photographers* (1862) and *Children Playing at Doctors* (1863). The games are harmless enough, though we sense danger when a boy, in the latter, climbs onto a chair to get into the cupboard. The rearrangement of furniture and improvisation of props is in itself anarchic and disruptive. Children take the serious business of life and make nonsense of it. Their ebullience is appealing but also an indicator of the lack of restraint and reason in these unformed bundles of energy. This surely is the point of Arthur Boyd Houghton's images of children produced as wood engravings in illustrated magazines and books. 'My Treasure' appeared in *Good Words* in 1862, and 'The Chair Railway' in *Home Thoughts and Scenes* in 1865 (fig. 2). These pictures give us little children who are intensely involved in what they are doing. The baby pulls the mother's long hair so that it stretches between them and falls in a fascinating cascade. The thought, 'my treasure' is the mother's, and her rapt contemplation of the child is a major component of the picture, but Houghton gives subjectivity to his child figures too, and they are not always joshing and frolicking. Both the baby and the little girl are gazing with utter seriousness. Their world is indicated by the focus on the patterned carpet, the area under the table and chair, the scatter of toys. In 'The Chair Railway' too, the solemnity of the children is emphasised and the strange spatial involutions of their play world

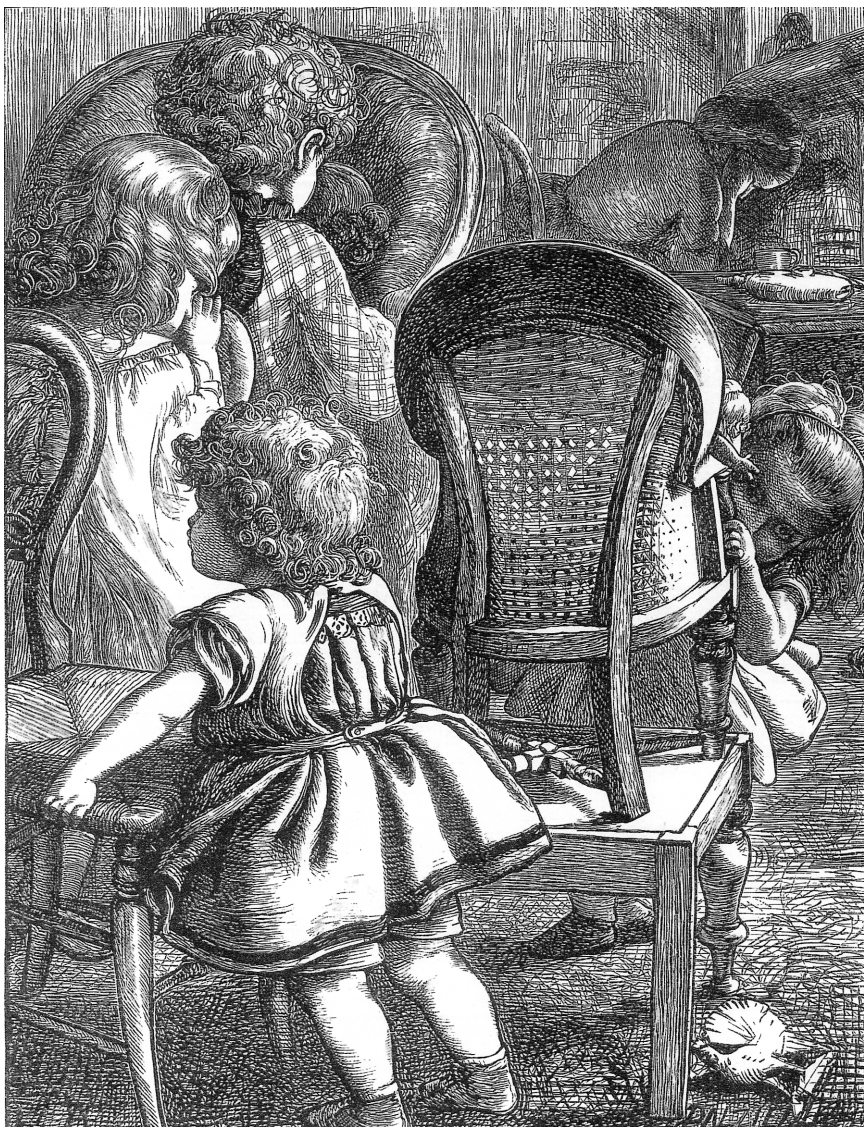

Fig. 2. Arthur Boyd Houghton, 'The Chair Railway', from *Home Thoughts and Scenes*, 1865.

that renders the domestic unfamiliar. We can melt with sentimental abandon when we see the adorable curly heads and pudgy arms, the little lacy collar and straining pinafore button. But as viewers we are challenged by the inscrutable regard of the little girl staring round the chair. She has big wide-open eyes and there is nothing coy or winsome in her look. Does she or does she not acknowledge the viewer's presence? Encountering that stare we have to reserve the sentimental sigh and we hesitate to laugh.

Houghton goes beyond the comic antics of Webster and Hardy to summon up a world in which those untrammelled childish energies slip from the comic to the serious. Because we have moved to a child's eye level we have lost the judgmental perspective of the adult. Perhaps, having made this shift there is no longer any need for comedy to license the destabilising energies of childhood. It is a very important move, that reminds us of the way that the frenetic activity in Victorian fairy subjects oscillate between childish naughtiness and demonic malignity. That fairy world is one where immorality shades into amorality. Eventually, in the world of imps and elves, it is necessary to abandon questions of innocence preserved or lost. 'Noah's Ark' is from the same volume as 'the chair railway'. Again the viewing position is low, the children absorbed so that we can't judge their expressions. This picture contains another stare from a solemn child, this time failing to acknowledge the viewer, but nonetheless eloquent of a reserved subjectivity. Even when Arthur Boyd Houghton paints the 'good' child, in a much more readily moralisable scene the autonomy of the youngster is remarkable. His undated oil painting *Halcyon Days* shows a little girl who is appropriately busy with needlework and not disturbing her papa. As she is perched on his knee sewing the two of them can get on with their pursuits and maintain a sociable silence. She is in her own world, perhaps, as her father is deep in his book, but, seated where she is, she is hoisted to the level of a painting on the wall behind her: a strange scene of masked and armed figures, in some pageant or ceremony that we can only half make out. If this is her world it is a troubling one. Moreover there is something about the positioning of the child on the perimeter of the rocking chair's curve that suggests the ability to swing the chair out of its position. Even here Houghton has thwarted any impulse on the part of the viewer to subordinate the child to the authority of the grown-up world, or to code the child as pure and innocent.

Millais did, on occasion, employ the genre convention of comic action, and as in the work of Webster and Hardy that I have discussed, comedy functioned to license a deviation from moral correctness. Perhaps the most obvious example to point to is the pair of pictures

painted by Millais in 1862-4 and exhibited in 1863 and 1864 at the Royal Academy: *My First Sermon* and *My Second Sermon*. Bolt upright and attentive on the first occasion the little girl draws her brows together in an effort to follow, and crosses her short legs at the ankle correctly. The Bible is placed 'just so' on the pew beside her and she is the image of correctness, funny in the solemnity that does not match her tender years. The only hint of relaxation is given by the slightly casually placed fur-edged coat or cape on the end of the pew, and the kid gloves that have been drawn off and laid down less than neatly. Her adult companion, it appears is not as correct as she endeavours to be. In the follow-up picture her legs dangle uncrossed, her hat has been removed, and the head lolls to one side as she has fallen fast asleep (fig. 3). Now there is no sign of the Bible and from our viewpoint to the left we can see that that black mantle has slipped almost to the floor. Certainly the pair of pictures makes a comic point, though the little girl remains serious and does not lark about; we are meant to smile as we see that her childish nature has overcome her. Effectively the sequence shows us the child reverting to her naturally impious state. This is a thought that the reference to adult negligence allows us to entertain: but, as in all these child subjects, the child remains blameless. Millais's commercial sense made him aware of the advantageousness of producing a sequel in this way. It meant that the engravings of the pictures could be sold as a pair which would boost sales. But it was not his style to maintain the child's image as a socially responsible and virtuous one. However pretty and appealing his children were, there was always something troubling that undid the reassurance.

In other cases Millais excised the comic aspect, leaving a startling seriousness. This, rather than the gentle comedy of *My First* and *My Second Sermon*, was Millais's preferred mode. Millais explored many of the same themes in his genre paintings as he did in his portraits. Indeed by introducing an unusual solemnity into the genre scenes and an usual relaxation of pose into the portraits Millais was able to erode the distinction between the two categories, particularly with respect to child subjects. *Autumn Leaves* puzzled critics when exhibited in 1859 for its lack of story or obvious anecdote. Retrospectively we can recognise it as a pioneering work in the Aesthetic Movement's tendency to abjure the anecdotal. Such erosion of narrative disrupts the expected theme of the slipping of innocence. Erotic awareness is not seen as a stage that displaces or categorically alters the intense energies of an unblithe, deadly, child world. A picture by Millais of 1869, *Portrait of Nina Lehman*, is unusually relaxed for a full-scale full-length portrait; the girl does not sit straight, and her foot has slipped out of its satin slipper. When the

Fig. 3. J.E. Millais, *My Second Sermon*, 1862-4, Guildhall Art Gallery, Corporation of London.

painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1869 the *Saturday Review* commented that 'Nina' was 'a little too negligée in attitude, even for a child', before heaping praise on 'texture, transparency, dexterity, and what affluence of colour has been thrown into a background which seems to catch the subdued and balanced splendour of Oriental decoration'.[11] Many of the reviews saw this as the most triumphant achievement of the year. The comment that interests me the most though, is by Bernard Cracroft in *The Fortnightly Review*.

> There the child sits, one leg dangling from a green garden vase, the glaze of which Mr. Millais throws in with unaffected ease … the other leg in childish fashion rests, the point of the foot half-bent upon the floor, at right angles to the first, while, as happens to children, the heel of the silk shoe has left its foot to rest partially on the ground. All the accessories are triumphs of workmanship down to the silk stockings, but their individuality does not intrude itself. What culminates is the child itself, with her dogged and careless, but living repose; not a muscle on the move; no society smirk, no effort at prettiness, no manner, nothing but living life, and that blunt, undivided, undisturbed look of children, reminding one, as the look of children so often does, of the animals mentioned by travellers in the islands where man is unknown, and who gaze on the first comer with motionless, unconscious stolidity.[12]

Cracroft goes on to praise Millais not for the skill and beauty of this picture but for its sincerity, which he says is worthwhile even if achieved by 'a certain brutality'. This set of comments seems to me extraordinarily insightful because it fastens on the way that childhood is represented in Millais as another world, with its own rationale and precepts that are resistant to the containing efforts of morality and teleological narrative.

Victorian artists certainly responded to the beauty, particularly of girl children, but also of boys. But the access of tender pleasure at the dainty forms and soft textures was not conditional on a corresponding soft docility. Instead there was a recognition of these little creatures as autonomous beings, almost alien beings, who had their own deadly preoccupations. In Victorian pictures we encounter many children who offer us glances which could be described in the word used by Cracroft for Nina Lehman, 'blunt, undivided, undisturbed'. In terms of the physique of the children prettiness may have been a key but physical idealisation in classical terms was not. Children could be shown as brutal, unbounded, even unformed. Beauty could be disconnected in this context, cut loose from its familiar moorings in narrative and morality.

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Endnotes

This contribution is based on material first developed for a lecture at the National Portrait Gallery in 1999

1. *First Report of Commissioners for Enquiring into the Employment and Conditions of Children in Mines and Manufactories* (1842) (380), XV, I (Royal Commission appointed in 1840), quoted in E. Hopkins, *Childhood Transformed: working-class children in nineteenth-century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 53.
2. E. Halévy, *Victorian Years (1841-1895), Halévy's History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 4 (1946) (London: Ernest Benn, 1961), 27; John Roach, *Social Reform in England 1780-1880* (London: Batsford, 1978), 139; Robert Gray, 'Languages of Factory Reform', in P. Joyce, ed., *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 151; E. Hopkins, *Childhood Transformed; working-class children in nineteenth-century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 42-69.
3. H. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, I (1861-2) (New York and London: Dover, 1968), 425.
4. Mayhew, *London Labour*, 468.
5. James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: the Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Robert Polhemus, 'John Millais's Children: faith and erotics', in Carol T. Christ and John O. Gordon, eds, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995); Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: the history and crisis of ideal childhood* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998). See also Laurel Bradley, 'From Eden to Empire: John Everett Millais's *Cherry Ripe*', *Victorian Studies* 34 (1991): 179-203 and Pamela Tamarkin Reis, 'Exchange', *Victorian Studies* 35 (1992): 201-6.
6. *Millais: Portraits*, exhibition catalogue (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1999), 107.
7. J.G. Millais, *The Life and Letters of John Everett Millais* (London: Methuen 1899), II, 389.
8. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 261, 393
9. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 343
10. Millais, *Life and Letters*.
11. *Saturday Review* (5 June 1869): 745.
12. Bernard Cracroft, 'The portraits in the Academy of 1869', *Fortnightly Review* (1869): 673.

Victorian Childhood

Sally Shuttleworth

Scholars in the humanities over the last thirty years have added first gender, and then race, as factors to be considered alongside class in all forms of historical and textual analysis. With the benefit of hindsight we can look back in mild embarrassment to key works in our fields that seemed oblivious to the importance of empire in the Victorian era, or to the workings of gender ideology. Is it now time to add age, and more specifically childhood, to the triumvirate of class, gender and race? Certainly there are similarities in terms of structural inequalities: