

Introduction

“A boy phenomenon, perhaps?” suggested Nicholas.
“There is only one phenomenon, sir,” replied Mr.
Crummles impressively, “and that’s a girl.”
(*Charles Dickens, “Nicholas Nickleby”*)

THIS BOOK explores the intimate relationship between middle-class men and little girls in nineteenth-century British culture. *Men in Wonderland* traces the ways in which a number of male authors in this period construct girlhood and analyzes the exact nature of their investment in the figure of the girl. The idealization and idolization of little girls, long acknowledged features of the Victorian era, cannot be thought of without reference to a pervasive fantasy of male development in which men become masculine only after an initial feminine stage. In this light, little girls represent not just the true essence of childhood, but an adult male’s best opportunity of reconnecting with his own lost self. The works of the individuals discussed at length in the study ahead—Wordsworth, De Quincey, Dickens, Ruskin, and Carroll—exhibit in various ways this male myth of feminized origin. Juxtaposing these literary texts and art forms with a range of other cultural productions such as philanthropic tracts, conduct books, government reports, fine art, and popular journalism, *Men in Wonderland* demonstrates both the evolution of the idea of the ideal girl in the nineteenth century, and the manifestation of the concept of original girlhood in genres that would seem less driven by personal motivations. Although this fantasy of development by no means holds universal sway, it nevertheless makes its way into general currency because of its appeal to an important and influential strain in nineteenth-century discourse, a strain that is noticeably middle class, religious, paternalist, sentimental, nostalgic, and conservative.

Recognizing the existence of such a historical phenomenon brings numerous benefits to Victorian studies. In particular, this perception fuels the reassessment of the oeuvres of a variety of literary artists, especially inasmuch as it complicates the narratives of pedophilic desire that have habitually been employed to explain the work of the nineteenth century’s most infamous girl-lovers (Ruskin and Carroll figuring here as the two most familiar examples of the type). More broadly, the identification of

INTRODUCTION

such a paradigm advances our understanding of such important characteristics of the age as its fraught constructions of masculinity, its obsession with loss, its rampant sentimentality, and its intense valorization of the little girl at the expense of mature femininity.

In many ways, to point out that the Victorians thought of early childhood as a feminine era is to state the obvious. After all, here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world of infancy and young childhood is still largely perceived as a female domain: not only does the care of little children continue to be primarily woman's responsibility, but the terms with which the early period of childhood is characterized—a time of “softness” and “vulnerability,” requiring “gentleness” and “protection”—remain resolutely feminized. For these reasons, Freud's account of the process by which human beings come to understand sexual differentiation remains problematic: because of the feminine aura of those early days, it is hard to swallow his theory that all children initially believe themselves to be “little men,” and that only upon noticing their “lack” do little girls regretfully give up this fantasy.¹ If childhood is a feminized world now, it was even more so in the nineteenth century: whereas male babies today are soon dressed in clearly coded “masculine” apparel and colors, large numbers of Victorian photographs of scowling boys in short frocks exist to remind us that brothers and sisters used to be “clothed alike,” as Coleridge wistfully recalls in “Frost at Midnight.” Although the breeching ceremony of the early modern period—the great day when a six- or seven-year-old boy would shed his girlish dress and don trousers—had more or less fallen into obscurity for the Victorians, it was not until the twentieth century that boys, in any of the social classes, would wear obviously gendered clothing before this relatively advanced age.² Perhaps more significantly, for many boys of the middle and upper classes the age of six or seven signaled the removal from maternal or feminine care in the home into the masculine world of the school: up until this point, their lessons would have taken place alongside their sisters in a female-staffed nursery.³ Trousers and school thus marked the end of the first phase of existence for boys; girls of these classes, still wearing petticoats and pursuing their education, for the most part, at home, experienced no such division between early and later childhood. Given that the garments and worlds left behind continued to be female, then, the first six years of male life in the nineteenth century carried a clear stamp of femininity, especially when viewed in retrospect. While it may be a critical commonplace that the Victorians adhered to a rigid system of gender sep-

INTRODUCTION

aration, in this particular instance it seems that young boyhood crossed the line, and actually looked more like girlhood.

It is, however, one thing to notice that the early lives of boys found them wearing versions of female clothing and lodged in the female-controlled zones of the house, and quite another to register the depth of passionate investment in nineteenth-century writings that both insist that perfect childhood is always exemplified by a little girl, and that, despite the logical and biological impossibilities of the stance, lament a man's lost girlhood. To understand the climate that fostered the growth of a fantasy of primary and ideal femininity, it is necessary to examine the beliefs that informed the Victorians' fascination with the idea of the child. The account here begins with a brief summary of the general historiography of childhood in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies, and then moves to a consideration of the complicated and contradictory origins of the concept.

Since the publication of Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* in 1962, it has generally been accepted that the idea of childhood is a fairly recent invention.⁴ According to current explanations, childhood's birth is coincident with the rise of the middle class in late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, and its infancy appears to draw strength from the twin sustenances of the Evangelical movement and Romantic thought.⁵ Historians document the growth of philanthropic concern for children, which manifests itself in institutions like the Foundling Hospital, the burgeoning Sunday school movement, and early campaigns for the abolition of exploitative labor, while those on the literary trail register the central importance of the child in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Blake, and William Wordsworth.⁶ Contemporary scholarship claims that this interest in the child grows ever more particularized as the nineteenth century progresses: by virtue of the rapid pace of industrialization and population expansion, runs the argument, the plight of the laboring and the indigent child becomes hugely obvious and eventually energizes massive legislative reform and the erection of comprehensive educational and social welfare systems for the working-class child.⁷ Investigating Victorian domestic ideology's construction of the inviolable middle-class home, feminist critics and historians contend that the life experience of the child of comfortable means came to be shaped with comparable rigor in this period.⁸ This is also an era, it is maintained, in which the child and its properties become the subject of specialized legal and medical discourse.⁹ Furthermore, the figure of the child evolves into a dominant icon both for elite and popular consumption: six hundred

INTRODUCTION

thousand copies of *Cherry Ripe*, an engraving by the Royal Academician John Everett Millais, are not enough to satisfy public demand in 1880, while Charles Dickens's thirty-year career furnishes a veritable kindergarten of child heroes and heroines for the collective mind.¹⁰

This overview gives a sense of the highly visible centrality of the child in any number of arenas and at all class levels in Victorian life. More difficult to describe is the meaning carried by the idea of the child in this period for the influential middle-class community that constitutes the primary focus of this study. Because the era of childhood was of paramount significance to two powerful, and apparently opposed, systems of thought, one would expect to find deep and irresolvable contradictions embedded at the heart of the nineteenth century's perception of children. On the one hand, to thinkers as various as Locke, Rousseau, and Wordsworth the child represents a pure point of origin, deeply connected to the natural and primitive world, and as yet unmired by the sullyng forces of language, sexuality, and society.¹¹ On the other, the eighteenth-century revival of hard-line Puritan attitudes in some strains of the Evangelical movement brought to the fore the doctrine of the primary corruption of human nature: the child comes into this world as a bearer of original sin, a creature of fundamental depravity. And yet in spite of this radical disagreement, these two different visions of the child turn out to be remarkably amenable to each other in the daily practice of nineteenth-century life and discourse.¹² Up until fairly recently, the secular bent of literary and historical studies has resulted in a disproportionate emphasis upon the prominence of the Romantic idea of the child in the Victorian period: consequently the Evangelical perspective, and its perceived extremism, has been given relatively short shrift. In the past fifteen years or so, however, the importance of acknowledging the deeply religious, if complicated and often conflicted, character of at least the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century has become more widely appreciated. In consequence a more balanced view of the child's combined heritage is now beginning to emerge.¹³

Between the 1730s and 1830s the Evangelical movement galvanized British Christianity, affecting practically all denominations from the established to the Nonconformist sects. While Evangelicals came to be active in every sphere of social reform in the nineteenth century, the primary tenor of this new religious enthusiasm was essentially personal and domestic: adherents were encouraged to scrutinize with unprecedented intensity the states of their own souls and those of others, especially family members, and to conduct with great reverence such home-centered activi-

INTRODUCTION

ties as private and family prayers, meditation, and Bible study. Within such a regimen of spiritual examination, attention to the child was particularly marked. This watchfulness, however, took various different and sometimes competing forms. For those Evangelicals, both inside and outside the Church of England, who subscribed to Calvinistic doctrines of original sin, it was imperative to guide and educate children to give them the best opportunity of redeeming themselves, so they might obtain God's grace.

To modern, and even to many contemporary standards of judgment, the strict codes of supervision and punishment levied by zealots endeavoring to save children from their corrupt natures often ran dangerously close to cruelty. Even though this residue of earlier theological thinking insisted on the fundamental wickedness of children, it nevertheless concurred with the otherwise opposed Romantic code in placing tremendous emphasis on the care of the child, and in seeing the world as a continual source of moral danger. Many other Evangelically minded Christians, however, found themselves turning away from theories of original sin toward ideas more overtly compatible with Romanticism's idealization of children: in this frame of mind, Scripture could, for example, be reinterpreted in line with Wordsworth's ideas about the child, and thus "texts urging us to become as little children were now about innocence, rather than, as in Puritan dogma, about obedience."¹⁴ Children, then, were to be closely observed because they offered adults glimpses of an original heavenly purity. Perhaps not surprisingly, those whose secular or religious beliefs promoted such a glorified view of childhood could on occasion be just as exacting as the most doctrinaire Calvinist on the subject of acceptable child behavior.

These different strains of Victorian Christianity, then, found themselves variously in contention and agreement with Romanticism's view of the child as pure and innocent, but ultimately colluded with its insistence upon the central importance of childhood. While such theoretical positions had obvious implications for the ways in which children were perceived, just as significant were the derived effects of Evangelical Christianity's relocation of the sacred from the supernatural and ecclesiastical, to the personal and familial, realm. In this essentially domestic religion, the ideal Christian home and its occupants became "objects of sentimentalization, bordering on worship."¹⁵ The mid-nineteenth-century crisis of belief that famously struck down many middle-class Evangelicals, causing them to turn away from institutional religion and search elsewhere for salvation, strengthened this sense that the family, and most particularly, the

INTRODUCTION

child at its heart, offered an alternative access to grace and purity. On a still deeper level, the story of Adam's ejection from Paradise in Genesis, previously important to the perception of childhood because of its explanation of the source of original sin, increasingly offered itself as a myth of personal development to middle-class Victorian individuals, both religious and otherwise. Evangelical Christianity's drive toward self-examination had led the way to making religious narratives much more personally applicable: now, as John Gillis puts it, whether or not orthodox belief was present, the Garden of Eden "ceased to be a place, and became a stage of life," the time of childhood (7). In a move that has huge significance for this particular project, such retrospective imagining of the early years of life as a paradise of innocence and purity not only placed an absolute line of division between childhood and adulthood, but also declared that same adulthood to be a time of postlapsarian guilt and gloom.

Understanding both why this model was so compelling to middle-class men and why those childhood years were most satisfyingly embodied in the figure of a little girl will be a major task in the chapters ahead. For now, we can notice in broad outline a couple of factors touched upon earlier. Men from comfortable backgrounds in this period were far more likely to have experienced a definitive break between those early years in the feminized nursery and their subsequent careers in the wider world than women of their class, whose lives were generally expected to be bounded by the home. Furthermore, this same gendering of the home, and its concurrent transformation into the locus of the sacred, not only had the effect of creating that domestic, and now much vilified, paragon, the Angel in the House, but also her ideal daughter.¹⁶ On those occasions when paradise was imagined as the primary, lost stage in the journey of life, rather than the sanctified home, then the perfect little girl formed its most apt symbol.

While this project plainly situates itself within the historiography of childhood, it simultaneously has relevance and allegiance to a number of other important scholarly arenas. My analysis owes a huge debt to the pioneering labors of academic feminism over the past twenty years, particularly to its careful explication of nineteenth-century constructions of the feminine, and the concomitant emergence and consolidation of domestic ideology.¹⁷ Furthermore, this study finds a home in the burgeoning world of masculinity studies, a field that has recently grown out of the work of these feminist precursors. Like many of the works in this area, the present investigation is part of the movement to complicate our understanding of

INTRODUCTION

the complexities and contradictions that both challenged and supported nineteenth-century gender ideology: while earlier historical and critical studies often reproduced the Victorians' division of the "separate spheres," now "the 'private' is being reformulated to take account of men, in the same way that the scope of the 'public' has been progressively enlarged to take account of women."¹⁸ Although my work has benefited from contemporary examinations of the subtle stratifications and shifting patterns within the English class system, and of the anxious constructions of different styles of masculinity, in the nineteenth century, *Men in Wonderland* takes a relatively broad swathe of middle-class male life as its area of investigation. The term *gentleman* is thus included in the book's full title simply to indicate that the principal subjects of this study are of the well-to-do classes.¹⁹

If this project participates in both childhood and masculinity studies, then it also aims to contribute to the current investigation into the construction of transgressive sexualities in the Victorian period. For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, nineteenth-century figures who appear to display desires other than those expected within normative conjugality were generally analyzed in the light of a single, and now largely outmoded, theory that invoked the familiar narrative of a repressive Victorian culture. In this hydraulic account, the sexual urge was forced underground by prudish proprieties, only to burst out triumphantly and obscenely in aberrant and unnatural forms.²⁰ Carroll's and Ruskin's evident fascination with little girls, to be named "paidophilia" in 1906 and catalogued under "Abnormality" by Havelock Ellis in his *Study of the Psychology of Sex*, constitutes one of the various eruptions in this story. Literary critics working in the shadow of this model had few options open to them in their study of Carroll and Ruskin, for they could only support, deny, or ignore (and this last course was the road most taken) the portrait of the artist as pervert. Michel Foucault's challenge to the repression hypothesis, however, excited a wealth of investigation into the constructed nature of sexuality and the historical emergence of different categories of "deviants."²¹ Consequently it became possible to examine the case of the Victorian girl-lover from different perspectives, and to consider how his obsessions might be related to those of his society.²²

Foremost amongst today's investigators is James R. Kincaid, whose *Child-Loving* assimilates Ariès to Foucault.²³ Kincaid concurs with *Centuries of Childhood's* basic argument about the recent emergence of the concept of the child, but adds his own twist. Given that the apparent absence or presence of sexuality became a key factor in the separation of

INTRODUCTION

adult and child, it was inevitable that both the dividing line, and the child itself, should have become heavily eroticized. The very act of creating a pure, asexual, blank child produces sexual desire: the emptiness cries out to be filled. The child, then, was created as the infinitely desirable Other. According to Kincaid, the pedophile becomes an indispensable figure in the drama: he is the imaginary monster that we have created to reassure ourselves that our own desires for the lovely child are proportionate.

Kincaid's argument is compelling, but it is important here not to collapse together two historically distinct moments or to ignore the question of gender (boys and girls appear to be equally fascinating in his account). The beginning of widespread cultural interest in the child and the recognition of the figure of the pedophile are not simultaneous events, but are separated by over a hundred years. The point is not to deny that sexual desire may be present in the gentleman's obsession with the child, but to ask questions about the cultural origins of that desire, to consider what *else* that adult interest might be signifying in the period before the pronouncements of medicalized discourse effectively closed down all explanations other than the diagnosis of individual pathology. Concentrating upon certain male writers' conceptualization of their childhood selves suggests that temporally displaced self-love²⁴ is a major theme not only in the cultural productions of the Victorian era, but also in its famous programs of social reform. Likewise, insisting on a marked tendency in this period to reimagine the young self as feminine brings gender issues to the fore and highlights the crucial links between attitudes toward children and domestic ideology.

On this latter point, I make a more concerted argument for the primary importance of girls to the Victorian imagination than Carolyn Steedman, who in *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority* agrees with Kincaid that in the nineteenth century, children were "distributed across the sex-gender system" in ways that are now impossible to recover. Yet she cannot help noticing that "when the child was watched, written about and wanted, it was usually a feminised set of qualities (if not a female child) whose image was left behind for our analysis."²⁵ Steedman's admission is hardly surprising: while her project is a wonderfully broad scrutiny of "the social and psychic consequences of embodying what is lost and gone in the shape and form of a child" (viii), she conducts this inquiry through a very particular search for avatars of Goethe's Mignon, who "after all the cultivated androgyny of her presentation, turns out to be a girl in the end" (9). *Men in Wonderland*, most notably in its final chapter, turns up its own share of Mignons, but it is rather Steed-

INTRODUCTION

man's attention to the wide-ranging effects of the adult's retrospective construction of the state of childhood that makes her book so important: this work, I hope, draws strength from her clear-sighted and often moving exploration of the investments adults place in the child through their beliefs, desires, and fantasies, and their use of "living bodies as expressions of the deepest springs of the self" (170).²⁶ Ultimately, however, *Strange Dislocations* is interested in recovering the child, and registering the distortions forced upon it by the adult's perspective: *Men in Wonderland* gives precedence to the adult fantasizer and thus tells a significantly different story.

This elucidation of the distinction between Steedman's work and my own preoccupations suggests a number of other important lines of demarcation. Of primary concern here is the male figure who constructs, in one way or another, a fantasy of his feminine childhood. Although ventures into related areas will help substantiate the argument, this emphasis necessarily excludes a range of undoubtedly interesting fields of inquiry. This book by no means attempts a comprehensive overview of the origins and appearances of the idealized girl in nineteenth-century literature and culture. It says very little about how women writers in this period manipulated the figure of the child in their works, autobiographical, fictional, or otherwise. Similarly, although Lewis Carroll's writings are examined, it generally avoids the genre of children's literature.²⁷ Furthermore, juvenile masculinity, which is obviously the main interest of Claudia Nelson's *Boys Will Be Girls*, gets scant attention in this study. All in all, then, I concentrate on the essential peculiarity of my central finding and trace only the twists and turns of a singular narrative through the nineteenth century.

The narrative told is of the rise and fall of the ideal girl, revealing the concomitant progress of the myth of the gentleman's lost girlhood. While the principle of organization is broadly chronological, and while all sections set examinations of the works of single figures against considerations of wider historical contexts, the exact approach to different types of cultural materials varies from chapter to chapter. Certainly there are strong threads that run throughout the entire project: first, the preceding discussion of the influence of religious belief and practice on the social and individual perception of childhood resumes at junctures in all chapters, most noticeably in the first three. Other connections are formed, second, by the continual invocations of two key literary texts and, third, by the repetitions of an iconic vision of the adult male and the little girl. The nineteenth century learns how to think about the sacred content of

INTRODUCTION

childhood and the blasphemy of child labor *through* Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* and Barrett's "Cry of the Children": lines from these poems recur as touchstones in the public and private discourses of the child examined in chapters 1, 2, and 5. In one way or another, all five chapters present pictures of man and girl together. On some occasions the couple appears in the mainstream of everyday Victorian life—Little Nell and her grandfather walk hand in hand away from the wildly popular *Old Curiosity Shop*; Carroll's Alice stops to listen to the White Knight's song; most ominously, sensational literature of the 1880s depicts the girl and the man in danger in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and the girl in danger *from* the man in the scandal sheets of muckraking journalism. More often, however, the image of man and girl is buried in little-read texts or private correspondence—summoned up in De Quincey's tear-stained reconstruction of the night of tenderness he shared with young Kate Wordsworth; excitedly re-created in Ruskin's celebration of his breathless dancing with an Irish schoolgirl; or figured in Carroll's enigmatic photographs of girls even when the adult male is ostensibly absent. All three of these recurrent features, then, unify a project that deliberately adopts a range of methodological techniques.

Chapter 1 places accounts of childhood development in the poetry and prose of William Wordsworth and Thomas De Quincey in relation to one of the numerous trajectories within the history of childhood. A study of the emerging concept of the juvenile delinquent and the provision of specialized care for young offenders provides a representative demonstration of the ways in which ideas about the child evolved between the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the midpoint of the nineteenth. General theories of childhood come to rely on absolute divisions between adult and child, corruption and innocence, masculine and feminine: by 1850 it is a truism that there is nothing so unlike a criminal as a little girl. Wordsworth presents two important images of the child: the vital boyish self of *The Prelude*, and the otherworldly girl, variously depicted as Lucy or his sister Dorothy, whose experience is ruptured in death, or allowed no maturation. De Quincey appropriates solely the latter half of the representation and applies it to his own autobiography, identifying the young self as consistently feminine, and definitively cut off from the adult by the fact of death. This is the paradigm that will provide the Victorians with an increasingly attractive image of the innocent self of childhood, isolated from a progressively threatening world.

Chapter 2 considers the ramifications of this mode of perception by scrutinizing a constellation of texts from the early 1840s. Readings of

INTRODUCTION

Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop* and Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Daughters of England* show how the model works as both personal and national fantasy, for the young girls in novel and conduct book alike are imagined as memorializing not only the past selves of their older male relatives, but also the rural idyll of a bygone England. Juxtaposing these works with the report by a royal commission in 1842 on children's employment in the mines and Elizabeth Barrett's short poem "The Cry of the Children," I examine the contradictions inherent within Victorian society's views of girlhood. While Little Nell and Ellis's exemplary daughters embody the deathly perfection of the era's idealizing depiction of young femininity, the government report, and Barrett's response to it, construct a radically different picture of the distinctly nonideal existence of a large proportion of the nation's little girls. The horrifying visions of exploited girl-labor brought to the public eye make it abundantly clear that innocent girlhood is not an universal phenomenon, but an economically contingent construction; more particularly, focus upon the active body of the working-class girl reveals it to be disturbingly sexual. Contained within these unresolved conflicts of the 1840s are the elements that will ultimately destroy the conception of the little girl as both repository of purity and moral worth, and fit representative of the Victorian gentleman's lost childhood.

Chapter 3 deals solely with John Ruskin, the first of the two notorious girl-lovers of this project. Here the angle of approach alters significantly: rather than relate Ruskin's literary representations of the self and of juvenile femininity to broad historical movements and public discourses, I present the economic, social, religious, educational, and familial circumstances of his immediate personal background. The following paradox is thereby highlighted: although Ruskin's autobiography *Praeterita* supplies a strong example of the paradigm that has general currency in the Victorian era, his existence is certainly not paradigmatic for his class and gender in this period. I study the self-feminizing tropes of the autobiography and describe the ways in which Ruskin's "school-girl" text of the 1860s, *The Ethics of the Dust*, reproduces the essential elements of the myth of the little girl's antiquity. In Ruskin's schema, young femininity is connected to the unsullied and vital purity of long-lost origins, and placed in opposition to the defiled world of the present day and a miserably compromised and decrepit male maturity. Ruskin's principal mode of representing the little girl within this myth is to view her in terms of the ancient and precious stones of the earth, to depict her as a brilliantly hard gem, jewel, or crystal: an erotics of aesthetic impenetrability appears again and again in his prose. This beautiful unyielding crystalline girl is

INTRODUCTION

not only an object of desire, however, but ultimately *Praeterita*'s figure for both the lost self of childhood and the continuing true self.

The study of Lewis Carroll in chapter 4 makes a virtue out of the fact that this particular worshipper of juvenile femininity left behind no autobiographical reconstructions of his own early years. In the absence of a textual narrative setting forth a fantasy of original femininity, I focus on Carroll's passion for the new phenomenon of photography and ask whether the images produced by this Victorian invention offered him an alternative means of substantiating a lost past. The photograph, simply through the mechanics of its technological process, coincides with the nineteenth century's dominant mode of viewing children: Carroll's studies of little girls evince an uncanny ability to confound oppositions, most notably that between adult and child. In stark contrast, tableaux or "photographic moments" from *Through the Looking Glass* and *Sylvie and Bruno* send quite different messages: without photography's inherent ability to combine past and present in a single image, Carroll's textual fancies paint only the most sentimental of portraits of the little girl, her signifying potential radically reduced by the inclusion of adult figures, usually the nostalgic old man, within the scene. Seen from this perspective, Carroll's decision to avoid the genre of autobiography is to be applauded: this is an artist who is much more likely to find a successful form for his fantasies of the little girl when he is able to efface the traces of his own presence.

The fifth and final chapter charts the destruction of the fantasy of the ideal girl. Anxieties about girls and sexual activity begin to move into mainstream discourses in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, finding their high-water mark in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of July 1885. The luridly titled "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," W. T. Stead's sensational exposé of what he claimed was the regular and widespread debauching of virgins in London, led to the raising of the age of consent in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of that year. The furor is a continuation of the unresolved conflicts examined in chapter 2: still at issue is the glaring disparity between the construct of idealized girlhood, and the depiction of girlhood as a lived experience for the working class. The worries aroused by the working-class girl, implicitly sexual in the 1840s, are now explicitly sexual, and the archetypal exploited child is no longer a collier or millworker, but a prostitute. Moral concern, whipped to a frenzy by Stead's tactics, elides the real issue of the economic basis of prostitution and delivers a blanket ruling on sexual activity for all girls under the age of sixteen. To satisfy the desire to establish an all-inclusive

INTRODUCTION

realm of protected girlhood, all girlhood, paradoxically, has to be viewed through the lens of sexuality. Cast in this light, girls could no longer play their former role for the Victorian psyche.

The book concludes with a brief glimpse of three prime girl-lovers in the wake of that turbulent summer of 1885. For Ruskin, immersed by turns in madness or idealized reconstructions of the past, there can be no response to the sexualization of his favorite human figure. Carroll, formerly the nineteenth century's closest observer of juvenile femininity, now advises that we all simply turn away. The final glance falls upon Rhymers' Club poet Ernest Dowson, whose brand of little-girl adoration most strikingly demonstrates the change in tenor of the late eighties and nineties. Analysis of his sonnet sequence "Of a Little Girl," reveals that Dowson's child is a potentially sexual receptacle for emotion, rather than the guarantor of the sealed perfection of the man's lost girlhood. Her innocence discussed and legislated out of existence, the little girl tumbles from grace at the end of the nineteenth century, leaving the way clear for a new star to rise. The boy, neglected for almost three generations, returns to embody a new image of childhood for a new age.