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BLACK FIGURES/ENGLISH LANDSCAPE

By Cora Kaplan

IN ONE OF HIS LAST CANVASES — worked on for some six years and unfinished at his death — the distinguished genre and landscape painter, William Mulready (1786–1863), famous for his depiction of children and childhood, produced one of the most resonant and complex images of race and Empire of the mid-nineteenth century.[1] Titled *The Toy Seller* and set in an emblematic rural landscape, it displays a mother holding a child of between one and two years old, while a kneeling pedlar respectfully proffers a rattle from a basket of similarly humble toys (Figure 19). The infant, however, perversely refuses to be tempted. Its body and gaze are turned awkwardly away from the toy seller, its shrugged shoulders and unhappy expression graphically suggest the unease provoked by the stranger's importunities, or perhaps merely his presence. Meanwhile the mother's look is turned with gentle concern on the distressed child. The pedlar too looks towards the baby with a still amd practiced watchfulness, as if waiting for the mother to coax the child into a more receptive mood. The toy seller is black; the mother and child are white.

The Toy Seller neither refers to some traumatic event in public history nor underlines, by its title, its racialized moral theme. This sets it apart from Mulready's much debated *Train up a child . . .* of 1841, in which a resistant older child is gently urged by two attentive female figures to give alms to three abject but sinister Lascar beggars, or J. M. W. Turner's explicit tragic depiction of *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon Coming On* (1840).[2] Nevertheless *The Toy Seller*'s radically ambiguous representation of racial difference and its effects, like those overtly didactic images, is one of a spectrum of crucial visual representations of racial difference, empire and their discontents.

One of the most innovative moves in the convergence of cultural studies and Victorian studies since the early eighties is an increasing attention to, and analysis of, the power of representations, especially the complex ways in which texts and images work on their audience. A critique which remains resolutely committed to a political perspective has nevertheless noted the often limited usefulness of readings which aim only to support or exculpate cultural productions and their makers from the charges of imperialism or racism. Instead, ambiguity itself, the contradictory responses to "race" or to imperialism that a visual or written text encodes and evokes, becomes a central object of analysis. An emphasis on ambiguities or ambivalences helps to complicate and to strengthen our always provisional understanding of how the everywhereness of figures of "race" or empire in Victorian society and discourse structured its epistemology, ethics, and aesthet-

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Figure 19. William Mulready, *The Toy Seller*, 1857–63. Oil. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

ics. Designating a reading as provisional is not a sign of analytic timidity, nor a flight from the political implications of such research. Instead it is the theoretical move that provides the condition for its integrity. Stuart Hall has identified it as the vital "tension" at the heart of an attempt to get anything like "an adequate theoretical account of culture and its effects." To work on culture, Hall argues, is always to be "working in an area of displacement," a "decentered" area that always "escapes and evades the attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures" (Hall 284).

The evasiveness of culture itself meets another register of displacement and evasion in a painting like *The Toy Seller*. The kneeling black figure, painted with loving detail and specificity and placed against a vivid blue sky, immediately suggests two other, very different images of black men in this posture. The first is scriptural and embedded in the history of religious art: the trio of figures against the emblematic rural background must evoke the visit and gift of the magi, with the ironic twist that the black king is now an itinerant pedlar and his gift is now for sale. A biblical vignette becomes both secular and commercial; the painting plays upon the sacred without allowing the joke to tip over into either parody or blasphemy. The second referent is contemporary: the kneeling black

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figure is the most popular of anti-slavery images. Medals and illustrations had made it, by 1860, one of the most well-known visual slogans of the period. Although missing from Mulready's painting, the accompanying rhetorical question "Am I not a man and a Brother?" is recalled to the Victorian viewer through its familiarity.

This question, however, has no easy answer by the late 50s and early 60s. The period after the abolition of colonial slavery sees the science of racial difference undergoing intensive elaboration, challenging the egalitarian humanism of the slave's petition. When slaves became free men and women, their place, and by extension the place of all racial others in economic and civil society in Britain and its colonies, became an increasingly anxious one. Racial science of every tendency from the early 40s tended to emphasize the aversion that supposed racial groups felt for each other. Whether this was the effect of nature or culture was in dispute, as was the question of the single or multiple origins of mankind. At the polygenetic pole of racial theorizing, aversion was seen to be an essential and positive attribute, nature's way of preserving racial purity and hierarchy. The infant's recoil therefore, from this otherwise unthreatening figure, may be read both as untutored and unsocialized and, in its very atavism, at once a sign of its humanity and its indisputable ethnic identity.[3] (In a much earlier, related, genre painting by Mulready, *The Rattle* (1808), a white infant eagerly reaches for the toy held in the hand of a white man or older boy.)

Childhood itself, as well as femininity, was undergoing radical redefinition in this period, and the association of both women and children with uncivilized racial others is one of the categorical problems that is at stake in their ideological revision. The humble black pedlar's presence deep in the symbolic heart of England may be read as the benevolent rationalization of a post-slavery empire in which free labor takes up its productive and hierarchical place, and elements of the painting support this interpretation, not least the very individual and strikingly human depiction of the black man — in contrast, say, to Carlyle's dehumanizing representations in "The Nigger Question" (1850) circulating widely in the early 50s. On the other hand the narrative in which disruptive black figures (mostly women) "invade" the white metropolitan nation proliferate in these decades. Moreover, the unregulated self-employed status of the pedlar, like the informal economies of the urban poor recorded by Henry Mayhew, are rarely seen as productive, but instead a danger to the social and economic body. Both *Train up a Child . . .* and *The Toy Seller* can therefore plausibly be read as characteristically urban scenes displaced into symbolic pastoral settings. However, resolving the painting's politics is not only difficult but, in some sense, beside the point, since its cultural power lies, as I have said, precisely in the way in which its ambiguities linger in, and trouble the imagination, expanding and intensifying the possibilities of racial thinking.

The placing of "race" in quotation marks, emphasizing the historical, non-biological construction of the category was a major theoretical shift that enabled and inspired new work on science and culture, although the effects of this bracketing has itself been seen as problematic. Recent scholarship in both Victorian and cultural studies has redirected our gaze from the racial identity of non-white others to the construction of Englishness and whiteness, and this rearticulation of the problem of ethnicity has made a dramatic difference to how "race" and empire are explored, altering the place of these topics in their cognate fields from self-contained subjects to ones that are seen to touch on and disrupt almost every other set of questions. Catherine Hall's suggestive work on white masculinity in *White, Male and Middle Class* (1992) and Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale* (1992) which

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explores the construction of white British femininity, are landmark studies here. As with the bracketing of "race," however, there is a danger that an exclusive focus on the making of Englishness and whiteness will displace the central agency of diasporan black subjects in the making of Atlantic modernity. (One could, for example, see how helpful the focus on Englishness and whiteness might be in understanding Mulready's painting, but how too exclusive an emphasis on it might obscure the question of black agency, clearly an important issue in *The Toy Seller.*) A check on that tendency, and a creative move in another direction is Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), which theorizes and traces the influence of black writers and intellectuals who traveled back and forth across the Atlantic. Gilroy's influential work centers on the hybrid and syncretic forms of modernity. Hybridity's genealogy in Victorian racial science has posed a question about its current progressive uses, producing heated debates among scholars who work in both cultural studies and Victorian studies — proof that the theorizing of these intersecting fields is still wide open, its terms and its histories productively unsettled.

It happens that my named examples of new work have been drawn from a group of British-based scholars, all of whom have roots in cultural studies, and only one of whom, Catherine Hall, is a Victorianist. This may speak to my present location and my own formation and history as a scholar. But the constellation of research and writing that has made "race" and empire such a dynamic site of synergy between cultural and Victorian studies is strikingly international and transgenerational. This last fact is very important. For the issues these scholars historicize and theorize will extend, we can be sure, well into the next millennium.

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NOTES

1. For an excellent discussion of the social and cultural implications of Mulready's work, see Pointon, who also discusses *The Toy Seller* in the context of the ideologies of child-rearing and imperialism. All the images I discuss are reproduced in Pointon's *Mulready.*
2. Gilroy discusses Turner's painting and its history in "Art of Darkness: Black Art and the Problem of Belonging to England," a brief suggestive essay on the cultural dimensions of racial politics.
3. I discuss the relationship of racial theory and the construction of childhood in the 1840s and 50s at greater length in my essay, "'A Heterogeneous Thing': Female Childhood and the Rise of Racial Thinking in Victorian Britain."

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