

## “Play[ing] Narcissus to a Photograph”: Oscar Wilde and the Image of the Child

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What does it mean, following the invention of photography, to refer to the image of the child? What is the figure of the child newly called upon to represent? And how, in turn, might we understand the relationship of the photographic image to nineteenth-century fiction for children? These fundamental questions attach to the work of Oscar Wilde in its profound engagement with the culture of childhood. By the later part of the century, generally considered the golden age of children’s literature, when Wilde published his fiction for children, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), photographs were ubiquitous commodities. Portrait studios had become fixtures in every town, and, as material objects, cheaply available *cartes de visite* insinuated themselves into many areas of daily life. For Wilde, photography was an important medium of self-promotion, especially in the form of the series of now well-known commercial portraits taken of him at Napoleon Sarony’s studio in New York in January 1882.<sup>1</sup> These photographs have been rightly praised for their exquisite method and for the performative poses and opulent costumes of their sitter. Such self-consciously set-up

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images of the artist as aesthete have become inseparable from our understanding of this aspect of Wilde's persona. There are, however, other familiar photographs of Wilde that establish a different iconography. These are not only photographs that picture Wilde as father to sons Cyril and Vyvyan, but they also include photographs of his children and his wife Constance that evoke Wilde through his absence. In practical terms, when exiled in France after his release from prison in May 1897, Wilde embraced the medium of photography and reported in letters his pleasure in taking pictures.<sup>2</sup>

Wilde's tales for children are also contemporary with a period in which the medium of photography had taken hold upon fictional narrative. It does so not simply in the form of the material presence of photographs in novels and stories, as a vital tool of blackmail, for example, in Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891), but photography also appears in more conceptually driven ways, as we can see in Thomas Hardy's story "An Imaginative Woman" (1894). In the latter, the protagonist Ella Marchmill identifies with a male poet Robert Trewe, whose photographic likeness she discovers in his rooms, which she happens to be renting. Her identification with Trewe becomes uncannily linked to his photograph when Marchmill subsequently gives birth to a son bearing a striking physical resemblance to the likeness of the poet she has never met. In the specific context of fiction for children, however, we find a focus on the image of the child compatible with a sense that the contemporary technology of photography might hold a key to understanding the larger culture of childhood in the period. The demands made upon readers of Wilde's stories, according to their explicit investment in the image of the child, raise questions as to what, at the fin de siècle, the camera might elicit from a minor, or appear to promise a viewer of a child's photographic image. Each of the four tales in Wilde's *House of Pomegranates*—"The Young King," "The Birthday of the Infanta," "The Fisherman and his Soul," and "The Star-Child"—turns a male child or youth into an image. Each story also stages, in a different scenario, that figure's relationship to his self-image, and correspondingly generates a particular image for an adult reader. The tales impel their reader to *look at the child*. But what happens in the process?

In establishing connections with, and debts to, the photographic discourse that was contemporary with them, Wilde's fairy tales invite their reader to contemplate the child as an image formed by a relatively new technology of vision. That image connects sometimes explicitly,

and at others implicitly, with the figure of Narcissus. The mythological youth, familiar in Wilde's work more generally, was himself assigned contemporary technological relevance when—twenty-three years after the announcement of the daguerreotype in Paris in 1839—Charles Baudelaire famously commented that “the idolatrous multitude” had “rushed, like Narcissus, to contemplate its trivial image on the metallic plate.”<sup>3</sup> But Wilde also recognized that, in essence, the photograph of a minor held the power to invite its adult viewer to stand Narcissus-like in relation to the image reflected from its smooth surface. At the same time, Wilde acknowledged that, in looking at the comparatively safe material form of a photographic portrait, one might narrowly escape Narcissus' idolatrous fate. In this larger context of identification, Wilde's images of the male child and the youth in *A House of Pomegranates*—especially in “The Young King” and “The Star-Child”—anticipate their author's later emotional investment in photographic portraits of boys and young men.

From its inception, photography intervened in established ways of picturing minors and forged a vital relationship with the body of the child. I have suggested elsewhere that, to a significant extent, the incipient medium relied for its definition upon the figure of the infant.<sup>4</sup> There were many reasons for this connection. Upon the invention of photography, an established cult of the Romantic child guaranteed an apt legacy for a new technology generated through the natural action of sunlight. Photographs of children also reminded Victorian adults that they each shared the developmental stage of childhood. But the spectre of infant mortality also loomed large in the historical mix. In an essay written in 1820, prior to photography, James Leigh Hunt—after commenting on the deaths of children—concluded: “those who have lost an infant are never, as it were, without an infant child. They are the only persons who, in one sense, retain it always.”<sup>5</sup>

As Audrey Linkman and others have shown, from the mid-nineteenth century the increasing availability of photographs had a vital impact upon attitudes to child mortality, particularly in the form of the post-mortem photograph. For many parents who lost a child in the second half of the nineteenth century, a post-mortem photograph was their *only* photograph of a son or daughter.<sup>6</sup> Such a photographic memorial to a dead loved one offers an emotive reminder of the more general power that photographic images of children exerted upon adults. Such power expressed itself not only through the sense of what Roland Barthes calls the “catastrophe” of the photograph (its propensity to “tell ... death in

the future”); it also petrified a child in such a way that the owner of the photograph retained a physical connection to the infant.<sup>7</sup>

Such a relationship of photography to the visual depiction of children transformed as more advanced photographic technologies came to replace earlier ones. In the beginning, the direct positive process on metal of the daguerreotype, invented by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851), reproduced unprecedented detail in its transcription of an original. Daguerreotypes had a small format with reflective mirror-like surfaces, and, since each image was a direct positive with no negative involved in its production, it did not have the capacity to generate copies of that original.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, William Henry Fox Talbot’s roughly contemporaneous salted paper process, the calotype, produced paper negatives from which positive images might be fixed with salt on light-sensitized paper. Distinct from the daguerreotype, Talbot’s process guaranteed multiple copies from a negative. The method represented a vital capability of photography as it subsequently came to be recognized—namely, the infinite mechanical replication of an original.

Early exponents of Daguerre’s and Talbot’s respective processes trained their cameras upon the bodies of children. Thus, for example, in a daguerreotype of 1850 by the US photographer Marcus Aurelius Root (1808–1888), the diminutive figure of a girl has been placed on a small table in order to reach the height of the lens of the camera positioned, as it would have been, upon a tripod (Fig. 2.1). This set-up, further miniaturizing the child, compounds a state of infancy as made visible by the novel medium. Almost specimen-like in her reduced dimensions, the girl looks out directly from the image. The overlaid colouring that accentuates her odd-looking fur-trimmed dress also lends a sense of opacity to the picture produced on metal: a quality lost in later paper- and glass-based processes. With polychrome introduced into the image in this way, a viewer is reminded of the failure of early photographic processes to reproduce the rainbow spectrum. Talbot, by contrast, in an apparently candid salted paper print recently on show at the Salt and Silver exhibition at Tate Britain, captures his five-year-old daughter Ela with an informal quality rare in a photograph from 1843–1844. Materially distinct from that captured on the polished metal surface of a daguerreotype, Talbot’s image appears embedded in the fibres of the salt-sensitized paper that supports it.<sup>9</sup>

From 1851, with Frederick Scott Archer’s invention of the wet collodion process, negatives on glass generated sharp detailed images in the



Fig. 2.1 Marcus Aurelius Root, “Unidentified Girl Standing on Studio Table” (c.1850), daguerreotype with applied color. George Eastman House 1979.3144.0001

forms of albumen prints on paper or glass collodion positives, or ambrotypes.<sup>10</sup> Professionals and amateurs alike took up the wet collodion process, since it guaranteed dependable results with tolerable exposure

times for sitters. In an albumen print of 1860 by Oscar Rejlander (1813–1875)—a contemporary of better-known practitioners Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879) and C.L. Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) (1832–1898)—a young boy leans over the back of a chair claspings a toy engine (Fig. 2.2). The crook of the boy's left elbow has been arranged so as to steady the weight of the model train he shows to the camera. Meanwhile, his gaze is directed wistfully into the lens and appears to travel beyond it. The look returned from the surface of the photograph is compelling. Yet a child directing his or her gaze deep into the camera is common



**Fig. 2.2** Oscar Rejlander, “Boy with Toy Engine” (1856), albumen print. George Eastman House 1972.0249.0030



in photographs of the period. Certainly, Rejlander—who is perhaps better known for his photographs of ragged children, and of facial expressions for Charles Darwin’s *On the Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872)—also produced more formal portraits of upper-class and aristocratic children.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the beautifully ringletted Severin Hower (Fig. 2.3) reciprocates, with assurance, the viewer’s look at him, and appears arguably more like a young Wilde than does Wilde himself in the rare photographs of him as a child.

During the 1860s, through commercialization, most notably in the forms of the *carte de visite* and the cabinet card, the volume of images of children increased exponentially. By 1891, the year of the publication of Wilde’s *House of Pomegranates*, the new technology of moving pictures



**Fig. 2.3** Oscar Rejlander, “Severin Hower” (1858), albumen print. George Eastman House 1972.0249.0014

had joined that of photography, further turning figures of children into images. While photography of this later period took its cues from painting and literature in establishing diverse iconographies of childhood, cinema subsequently looked to those photographic iconographies that had been developing since the 1840s. Children's faces fascinated cinema, too.<sup>12</sup>

Among the photographs of Oscar Wilde's immediate family is a portrait from 1889 of Constance Wilde with five-year-old Cyril, the elder of her two sons (Fig. 2.4). In this image of intimacy between mother and child, taken at the commercial London studio of Henry Herschel Hay Cameron (1852–1911) (the youngest son of Julia Margaret Cameron), Wilde is implicit by his absence.<sup>13</sup> It is a deeply affecting photograph, in part because of the modernity captured in the apparently spontaneous pose and smiling face of the boy, but also because, with the moving personal testimony of Vyvyan Holland's *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954) as guide, we know what comes next, so to speak. This photograph of Constance Wilde and Cyril Wilde gains its currency from prospective knowledge, post-trial, of Wilde's estrangement from his wife and sons. In so doing, the image stages a version of Walter Benjamin's profound realization from his "Small History of Photography": namely, that the future has always been present in the moment captured by a photograph, if only a spectator had known where to look for it.<sup>14</sup> With his cheek pressed against his mother's face, Cyril extends his arms over her shoulders, twisting his hands into a tight clasp. As Constance's fingers secure the child close to her body, thus conveying the intimacy of physical contact, this compelling portrait mimics the larger capacity of photography to capture touch, that sense apparently likely to elude a photograph's sleek two-dimensional form.

Wilde's second collection of stories, *A House of Pomegranates*, lavishly designed and illustrated by Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, was published two years after this photograph and appeared at a time when Wilde's domestic identity, as photographable, was coming under strain. Perhaps it is detectable in a picture taken in 1892 that Vyvyan Holland describes as the only family photograph of Wilde.<sup>15</sup> The image presents Wilde with Constance and Cyril on a visit to Cromer in Norfolk. Constance is seated, her eyes directed down to a book, with Cyril standing to her right. Wilde, by comparison, posed on the other side of their son—with his left hand around the child's shoulder and his right hand holding a cigarette—has the air of having recently joined the "sitters" in the natural garden setting for the photograph.





**Fig. 2.4** Henry Cameron, Constance and Cyril Wilde (1889). Collection of Merlin Holland

In *A House of Pomegranates*, with its lush motifs of symbolic fruits, Wilde exposes the anguish that accompanies the movement of a child from nature to the human community. “The Young King,” the first story

in the collection, centres upon the child of the Old King's daughter who had been stolen at one-week-old from his mother on the order of his grandfather. Owing to his disapproval of her secret marriage to a husband of lower social standing, the Old King had banished the boy to the forest where he was brought up as a humble goatherd by "a common peasant and his wife."<sup>16</sup> Likened to "a woodland Faun, or some young animal of the forest newly snared by hunters," this child raised in the forest becomes a figure of what Vicky Lebeau has referred to, in the context of cinema, as the child frequently "called upon to allegorize: the boundary between nature and culture."<sup>17</sup> Certainly, in one sense Wilde's story shares a fascination with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's noble savage, as well as Anselm von Feuerbach's "wild child of Europe" known as Caspar Hauser, discovered in Nuremberg in 1828. Yet in another regard, as the opening of Wilde's story recounts in Dorian Gray-like fashion his sensational relationship to beautiful things, the Young King is reciprocally a miniature figure of the aesthete. Prized in his room, "a laughing Narcissus in green bronze held a polished mirror above its head."<sup>18</sup>

Close to death, and either remorseful or wishing for an heir, the Old King—having retrieved his grandchild—makes preparations for the Young King's coronation. The child as the object of knowledge, and the origin of and spectacle for the gaze, immerses himself in the physical beauty of precious objects, anticipating especially his coronation robes, whose lavish designs and elaborate manufacture he has overseen. As the boy muses upon his imminent appearance "in the fair raiment of a king ... a smile played and lingered about his boyish lips, and lit up with a bright lustre his dark woodland eyes."<sup>19</sup> When, however, in a series of elaborate dreams, the Young King sees the enslaved labour and cruelty that go into the production of his fine robe of gold, his sceptre, and his crown, he rejects them. He fetches instead his old "leathern tunic and rough sheepskin cloak" for a robe, his staff for a sceptre, and a circlet of briar for a crown.<sup>20</sup> Yet when he appears in the Cathedral in these rude garments, and is not recognized as monarch by his subjects, the Bishop—who dismisses the youth's dreams—tells him to forget his conscience.

In response, by defiantly renouncing the exploitation he has witnessed, the Young King stands "before the image of Christ" where the natural light falling through the stained-glass window of the high altar transforms him physically.<sup>21</sup> Dressing the youth in those lavish robes he has refused, the sunlight turns him into a picture:

And lo! through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies ...

He stood there in the raiment of a king, and the gates of the jewelled shrine flew open, and from the crystal of the many-rayed monstrance shone a marvellous and mystical light.<sup>22</sup>

By a process of metamorphosis generated through the agency of sunlight, the Young King thereby receives, in miraculously produced form and stripped of their material value, those objects he desires simply for their aesthetic beauty. Furthermore, his wish for beauty appears sanctioned by the metaphysical transformation he undergoes, which is the result of a physical process. Light metaphorically photographs the youth as an image before his beholders. By creating for the Young King an appearance independent of human agency, Wilde's tale dwells upon the transformative power of light. In this sense, the Young King assumes a divine image generated through the sovereign agent of photography.

In allegorical terms, the physical metamorphosis of the youth in "The Young King," that involves the blossoming of his staff (much in the manner of the legend of Tannhäuser), recalls Simeon Solomon's original watercolour painting *Sacramentum Amoris* (1868), now lost, possibly destroyed.<sup>23</sup> The patron F.R. Leyland objected to the style in which the figure was painted, while the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne—who was at the time a close friend of Solomon—commented on its quality of "supersexual beauty."<sup>24</sup> That painting, exhibited at the Dudley Gallery in London in 1869, has its own peculiar links with photography, since it remains preserved, albeit in monochrome, in the form of Frederick Hollyer's photograph, and in Solomon's prose poem, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (1871).<sup>25</sup> In both the photographic reproduction and the text, the figure of Love "appears to the wanderer veiled in a saffron-coloured cloak and wearing a fawn-skin: 'in his hand he carried a staff, which was as the rod of the high priest, for as I looked upon its barrenness burst forth in almond bloom.'"<sup>26</sup> Like Solomon, Wilde eroticises the young male figure through a fusion of the divine with the natural that turns his Young King into an icon. As the boy, apparelled like a beggar, metamorphoses before the eye, the stone "saints in their carven niches seemed to move."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Young King's face assumes

the iconic status of an imprint, rather than an image made by hand. In this regard, Wilde's final line—"But no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel"—is precisely designed to incite desire in his reader to look upon it.<sup>28</sup>

Such images—generated as if through divine agency—owe a great deal to the material presence of photographs in Wilde's life. They dovetail specifically with both the photographs of his own children and with photographs that Wilde took himself and received from others. Shortly after Wilde's release from prison in 1897, Constance Wilde sent vignetted photographs of their sons Cyril and Vyvyan to her husband in exile at Berneval-sur-mer, near Dieppe. In their likenesses taken at a professional studio in Heidelberg in 1896, the boys appear in their school uniforms prior to their return to Britain (Figs. 2.5 and 2.6).

Just as Wilde comments upon the portraits directly in his letter of May 1897 to Robert Ross, in his memoir Vyvyan Holland cites in the following terms his father's response to the photographs:

Toward the end of the holidays we were taken down into the town to be photographed in our Eton suits: two self-conscious little boys, my brother solemn as usual, I restless and a little sentimental. My mother sent copies of these to my father and they were in his possession when he died. In a letter to Robert Ross from Berneval (29–30 May 1897) he wrote: "I have heard from my wife—she sends me photographs of the boys—such lovely little fellows in Eton collar—but she makes no promise to allow me to see them: she says *she* will see me, twice a year, but I want my boys." I do not think my brother was ever again taken by a professional photographer in a studio, though I have snapshots of him and photographs taken in groups. I myself was not photographed again for twelve years, except in groups. I suppose that none of the people we were allowed to know were sufficiently interested in us to want our photographs.<sup>29</sup>

For Holland, the Heidelberg portraits become highly freighted objects that retrospectively connect him with his father during the period between his parent's last seeing him and Wilde's death in Paris in 1900. Yet the power of the photographic portraits of Wilde's sons cannot simply be reconciled to the tragedy of their fate of mutual estrangement from their father and separation from each other. For the adult "son of Oscar Wilde" (almost sixty years after his mother changed her and her sons' family name from Wilde to Holland), remembering the loss of his father in childhood is traumatic. Holland's reproduction in



Fig. 2.5 Cyril Holland, Heidelberg (1896). Collection of Merlin Holland



Fig. 2.6 Vyvyan Holland, Heidelberg (1896). Collection of Merlin Holland



prose of Wilde's affection for those photographic portraits (these were his father's only mementos, apart from a few earlier letters from his and Cyril's preparatory schools) restores attachment to those precious child photographs as treasured material objects. The pictures became unsurprisingly significant to Holland because they had remained physically close to his father when Wilde was banished from all contact with him and his brother. To be sure, the photographs submit willingly to their role as intimate keepsakes touched, kissed, and held close by Wilde. Furthermore, recalling Hunt's claim that those who have lost a child "are never, as it were, without an infant child," the portraits also preserve Wilde's "boys" from a time close to when he "lost" them. Yet, as he reflects on the Heidelberg portraits, Wilde's expression of a fundamental desire for his "boys" conveys disenchantment at the illusion of touch. A promise of their presence, withdrawn just as soon as it materializes, compounds the physical absence of the children. In his framing of Wilde's comment, Holland's reflection that the people whom he and his brother were "allowed to know" had no desire for their photographs further demonstrates his retrospective attachment as sitter to the portrait.<sup>30</sup> Consigned to a fate of anonymity, Holland discloses how important to the child growing up was the knowledge of what his and Cyril's photographs had meant to his exiled father.

Additionally, however, just as the photographic portraits of Wilde's sons etch familial resemblance, the photographed face of a child holds a more general potential to pull the adult viewer back to identify with the infant state. The photographic print presents a perfect silenced image, and, for Barthes, "the profound madness" implicit in the doubling performed by photography, whose "mythic heritage" remains in "that faint uneasiness which seizes" a viewer looking at him or her self "on a piece of paper."<sup>31</sup> Since it masquerades as a mirror of sorts, though correcting its lateral inversion, a photograph of a child invites identification. Once we turn to the fate of the performing dwarf, in the second story in *A House of Pomegranates*, "The Birthday of the Infanta," we can witness the complication of such a process. Ridiculed by the Infanta and her young friends at whose birthday celebration he performs, the Dwarf unexpectedly confronts his image reflected in a looking glass. In his dawning realization that the grotesque figure that mimics his actions is indeed himself, he anticipates a perversion of what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan later famously called the mirror stage.<sup>32</sup> For instead of the infant's enjoyment at seeing an image of perfection in the glass, Wilde's dwarf experiences a shocking inaugural self-image that breaks his heart. In this story, Wilde appears to be

interested not only in the cruelty of children toward a grotesque figure but also in the Dwarf's tormented relation to his self-image. Without knowledge of his reflection, the Dwarf is content, but once he sees his own face in the mirror he experiences a wretched inversion of the Narcissus myth. In a story of anthropomorphized flowers, birds, and lizards, Wilde sets the Dwarf's fate against the attractions of his life in the forest. Like the protagonist of "The Young King," the Dwarf had enjoyed a childhood in nature prior to the time he was stolen in order to perform as a freak. Again, the image of a metaphorical child removed from the natural world exposes the anguish of a transition into a very different community. Moreover, as in "The Young King," the image of the child both as a figure of nature and as a natural lover of beauty appears designed to sanction the desires of an adult aesthete.

The fourth story in the collection, "The Star-Child," featuring a boy of incredible physical beauty, compounds this view. Here the child is a foundling brought up by poor woodcutters. The Star-Child's beautiful exterior, however, hides a cruel interior (a lack of compassion), and the story plays upon the mismatch between bodily beauty and blackness of heart. In this context, Wilde directly couples the child's cruel denial of his mother, the beggar woman, to his contemplation of his self-image. He peers Narcissus-like into a pool of water only to find that his face has lost its beauty. Yet, in subsequently atoning for his sin by wandering in search of the mother he has denied, the Star-Child inadvertently finds her and his father, both of whom are transformed when he risks his life to give to a beggar/leper. While the beautiful self-image that the Star-Child relies upon initially fails him, when he afterwards sees his face reflected in a shield, his beauty is not simply restored but also enhanced. Thus, in a strange tale of spite tied to extreme beauty, Wilde plays once more with the fate of Narcissus.

Both "The Young King" and "The Star-Child" call upon the story of Narcissus in ways that Wilde elaborates more systematically in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, revised 1891). But in less familiar terms, the image of Narcissus also remains integral to Wilde's comments on photography as a medium. More specifically, when during his last letters Wilde expresses a particular interest in the agency of photography, such interest is inseparable from his sense of what the medium can give to him in his exiled state. Moreover, even without his having met its subject, a photographic portrait invites Wilde to live again in the image of a beautiful boy. From 1898, Wilde ponders the photographed face

of Louis Umfreville Wilkinson (1881–1966) from Radley College in Oxfordshire.<sup>33</sup> A High Anglican establishment founded on the principles of an Oxford college in 1847 by William Sewell and Robert Corbet Singleton, Radley was the private school that Wilde's son Cyril attended from 1899 to 1903.<sup>34</sup> And there is a poignant sense in which, between 1899 and 1900, Wilkinson—the seventeen-year-old boy from Radley—comes to function in some respects as a complex proxy for Cyril, with whom Wilde was forbidden to correspond.

The only son of a clergyman, Wilkinson published throughout his life autobiographical and satirical novels under the pseudonym Louis Marlow.<sup>35</sup> His correspondence with Wilde, however, also had a fictional component. As Wilkinson himself later disclosed in his reminiscence *Seven Friends* (1953), in order to elicit a reply from the celebrated author he invented an "Ipswich Dramatic Society" and falsely claimed that, as its "Secretary," he wished for "permission to dramatise *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for performance by the members."<sup>36</sup> Oliver Marlow, Wilkinson's son from his first marriage to Frances Gregg, explains that—like others of his generation—his father had been outraged by Wilde's imprisonment and thus prompted to begin writing to Wilde.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, subsequent to Wilde's death, Wilkinson was "sent down" after four terms at Oxford for "blasphemousness."<sup>38</sup> His son notes his father's crime amounted to "experimenting" with homosexual relationships and that, afterwards, he became "a life-long campaigner against repressive laws to do with homosexuality."<sup>39</sup>

In the form of their letters to each other, Wilde and Wilkinson clearly enjoyed a narcissistic association fuelled not only by those stories the youth invented to prolong writing to Wilde; they were also equally connected through the place that the photographic portraits occupied in their letters, and through Wilde's allusions to such photographs in letters to his friends. In a letter to Reginald Turner on 3 January 1899 from the Hôtel des Bains, Napoule, for example, Wilde explains: "I am in constant correspondence now with a Radley schoolboy, aged seventeen. His photograph which he has sent me, and sends me constantly is most beautiful."<sup>40</sup> Wilde's correspondence with Wilkinson begins and ends with the material forms of photographs that, discrete and weightless, travel easily by post. Writing to Robert Ross in January 1899, Wilde likewise notes the appeal of the youth's photograph: "My Radley boy is called Louis Wilkinson—a horrid name—but his photograph is most interesting, and his poetry passionate and incoherent."<sup>41</sup>

Wilde had earlier written to Wilkinson on 28 December 1898 in terms that specifically linked the photograph to the mirror and thus to spectres of both narcissism and petrification:

I envy you going to Oxford: it is the most flower-like time of one's life. One sees the shadow of things in silver mirrors. Later on, one sees the Gorgon's head, and one suffers, because it does not turn one to stone ... In your second letter you tell me that you enclose your photograph for me, but no photograph was in the envelope.<sup>42</sup>

Acknowledging the allure of "shadows" seen in "silver mirrors," Wilde bemoans the mature adult's safe glimpse at a reflection of the gorgon's head. In so doing, he voices in mythological terms the complex relationship of photography to processes of transformation.

Subsequent letters from Wilde to Wilkinson confirm the eventual arrival in France of the aforementioned photographic likeness. In a mis-sive from the Hôtel des Bains, Napoule, postmarked 3 February 1899, Wilde distinguishes between the qualities of an amateur and a professional photograph that Wilkinson has sent to him:

Your photographs arrived quite safely. I don't much like the amateur one; it makes you look far too old, and a little too learned: but in the other you have the eyes of the poet, and your hair is charming. I am sure it is shot through with wonderful lights, and I like the curve of its curl.<sup>43</sup>

Here, the professional portrait lends to Wilkinson a poetic modelling of youthful eyes and hair absent from the amateur picture. In a letter to Wilkinson dated 2 November 1899, by comparison, from the Hôtel d'Alsace, Paris, Wilde is more philosophically reflective in his pronouncements upon the value of photographic portraits received:

Thanks so much, my dear boy, for your photographs. They interest me, fascinate me so much: not merely because they show me *you* as you are, but because they show me what *I* was in my Oxford days. I have photographs of myself just like, so like that many of my friends think on seeing your photographs that they are of me, twenty years ago; the hair, the brow, the *eyes*—all strangely like. The suggestion charms me, but *you* must not, in life at any rate, trail purple palls of tragedy, or be caught in evil nets of Fate.<sup>44</sup>

The apparent nostalgia of this rumination on photographs of Wilkinson belies the complexity of attachment Wilde expresses. In this regard, his italics are instructive. As photographs, they are valuable portraits of the sitter. Yet they gain a currency of fascination from their capacity to prompt Wilde's friends, and indeed Wilde himself, to see his own younger image in the countenance they have captured. The "suggestion" of resemblance that "charms him" lies in the experience of the other as self. Since the photograph resurrects a persona inhabitable again through identification with the image of a youth (Narcissus's offer of perfection), "charm" here resides in Wilde's seeing himself in another and another as himself.

More explicitly, however, in a letter concerning the youth's potential visit to him in Paris, Wilde names Narcissus, the figure variously and intriguingly present in his stories:

*I fear you would not like my hotel. I live there because I have no money ever. It is an absurd place: it is not a background: the only thing really nice in the whole hotel is your own photograph: but one cannot, or one should not, play Narcissus to a photograph: even water is horribly treacherous: the eyes of one who loves one are the only mirror.*<sup>45</sup>

Wilde follows his unabashed flattery of Wilkinson with a profound comment on photography as a medium. His meditation on the photograph, as he articulates it to the sitter, advises against the compelling influence of Narcissus. By openly voicing the power of the photographic image to invite a narcissistic identification that, following Baudelaire's example, was not lost upon early commentators, Wilde directly equates photographic emulsion with the "treacher[y]" of water. The emulsion and the water share a capacity to support the potentially fatal image of a boy: "but one cannot, or should not play Narcissus to a photograph." "Cannot" or "should not": the distinction is enticing. So, too, however, is the allusion to performance in Wilde's use of the word "play." Recognizing, by association, the perils of the mirror, Wilde cautions against its undeniable draw, maintaining "the eyes of one who loves one" as "the only mirror."

Wilde's prose poem "The Disciple," originally published in Oxford student magazine the *Spirit Lamp*, in June 1893, and revised and republished as one of six "Poems in Prose" in the *Fortnightly Review* (July 1894), anticipates such a narcissistic relation of an adult viewer to a

photograph of a boy or youth. Certainly, the conceit of the poem reverberates differently in the light of Wilde's comments on photographic portraits of Louis Wilkinson. In the poem, once Narcissus has died, the pool into which the youth used to gaze has changed from "a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears."<sup>46</sup> As the Oreads come "weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort," they misrecognize the pool's reason for mourning the loss of Narcissus: "We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he."<sup>47</sup> When questioned about his love for the fair youth, however, the pool asks with surprise: "But was Narcissus beautiful?"<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the pool proceeds to correct the Oreads' assumption that the loss of the beloved youth is the cause of his transformation from "sweet" to "salt" waters: "And the pool answered, 'But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored.'"<sup>49</sup> Wilde's poem thus ends with an unexpected inversion of the familiar mythological scene. As the water desires the reflection of Narcissus as a glass by which to "mirror his own beauty," the desire of Narcissus metamorphoses into the self-love of the vehicle of the youth's reflection.

In his final years, Wilde was clearly fond of revisiting this conceit of replacing Narcissus's "self-love" with that of the mirroring surface that generated his image. In a 1900 letter written from Rome to Robert Ross, Wilde notes: "Yesterday I went to *Albano*: how lovely it is! The day was beautiful, and the silent waveless lake a mirror of turquoise. It was wise enough to reflect nothing but its own beauty: would that the same could be said of all mirrors."<sup>50</sup> Praising, as a figure for the mirror, the lake at Albano for its wisdom in reflecting nothing aside from its own "beauty," Wilde again courts, by association, the dangers of the photograph. Just as his tales for children had earlier rehearsed the lure of narcissistic images of youth, in the later period of his life the receipt of Louis Wilkinson's likenesses brought home the relationship to the photographic image as one of self-love.

But it is not only the studio photographs and amateur snapshots of others that interested Wilde at this later stage of his life but also pictures that he took himself. In exile, when voicing his attachment to the photograph, he went so far as to maintain that he would like to be a photographer.<sup>51</sup> It is a claim that tallies with the well-rehearsed notion that it was the visible rather than the invisible world that most captivated him. Among the last photographs of Wilde known to exist are ones taken in Italy in 1900.



Some of the photographs Wilde refers to, as his grandson Merlin Holland explains, were most probably taken with his own camera.<sup>52</sup>

Wilde most likely used a Kodak. First introduced in 1888, the Kodak camera had simplified the business of photography for amateurs.<sup>53</sup> With its familiar catchy slogan, "you press the button—we do the rest," in 1889 Kodak introduced the first transparent roll film that greatly aided the amateur photographer. Shortly afterwards, its first daylight loading camera meant film could be inserted without the use of a darkroom. Furthermore, from 1895 the Pocket Kodak camera became available, greatly benefiting travellers such as Wilde. Measuring 2 and 3/16 ins × 3 × 4 ins and weighing only six ounces, the conveniently sized camera came with a choice of black or red leather casing.<sup>54</sup> We know from Wilde's letter from Rome to Robert Ross (dated 16 April 1900) that he was taking photographs in and beyond the city: "I send you a photograph I took on Palm Sunday at Palermo. Do send me one of yours, and love me always, and try to read this letter."<sup>55</sup> In another item of correspondence with Ross, written shortly afterwards, Wilde declares:

Rome is burning with heat: really terrible: but at 4.30 I am going to the Borghese, to look at daisies, and drink milk: the Borghese milk is as wonderful as the Borghese daisies. I also intend to photograph Arnaldo. By the way, can you photograph cows well? I did one of cows in the Borghese so marvellous that I destroyed it: I was afraid of being called the modern Paul Potter. Cows are very fond of being photographed, and, unlike architecture, don't move.<sup>56</sup>

Aside from his jokes about the likelihood of cows and buildings remaining still during exposures, along with his wish not to be confused with a seventeenth-century Dutch animal painter (Paul Potter), Wilde notes his intention "to photograph Arnaldo," one of a number of beautiful youths Wilde befriended in Italy and whose photographic likeness he wanted to secure.

Wilde's interchanges in letters of this period with Ross indicate the two men's mutual interest in photography. In a letter to Ross from Rome, dated 14 May 1900, Wilde writes: "My photographs are now so good that in my moments of mental depression (alas! not rare) I think I was intended to be a photographer. But I shake off the mood, and know that I was made for more terrible things of which colour is an element."<sup>57</sup> Although Wilde registers the deficiency of photography

with regard to colour, the act of taking photographs appears to have served more than a therapeutic function. It is also likely that Wilde was attempting self-portraits at this time, since in a letter to Ross, believed to be from late June 1900, he writes: "Thanks so much for the photographs: you photograph nearly as well as I do. What an art it is!"<sup>58</sup> Wilde reminds us that "to photograph" carries the dual meaning of "taking" and "being taken." As "an art," photography was one to which Wilde had come late. Nevertheless, that "art"—as Wilde calls it here—proved unsurprisingly attractive for one in exile. Even as early as June 1897, having arrived in France following release from prison, Wilde was seeking out photographs. He wrote to Mrs. Bernard Beere from the Hôtel de la Plage, Berneval-sur-Mer: "Send me a photograph of yourself if you can. I want to look at your shadow."<sup>59</sup> This request for the "shadow"—a reminder of that aspect of photography implicit in Wilde's most celebrated tale from *A House of Pomegranates*, "The Fisherman and his Soul"—restores the power of the imprint that omits the hand of an artist, and is bound to the body that casts it.

As such comments on photography indicate, from 1897 to 1900 Wilde enjoyed both taking and receiving photographs. Sent inconspicuously in letters, where they served as proxies for physical contact, photographs reconnected him with friends and loved ones. But photographs of children and youths proved especially significant for the powerful possibilities of attachment and identification they promised. In addition to the precious images of his own sons, the photographs that Wilkinson sent him offered Wilde the pleasure of encountering his own image. While he was not alone in the period in enjoying the possibilities for identification that photographs generated, it was in relation to the figure of Narcissus that Wilde newly formulated the temptations of the image. In the process, he embraced both the material and conceptual attractions of photography. By explaining to Wilkinson that it is only after the fact that one may experience "the flower-like" time of one's life, Wilde discovered in the youth's photographs the fascination of experiencing in real time the illusion of such perfection. Voicing (as he does so compellingly to Wilkinson) the perils of "playing Narcissus to a photograph," Wilde recognized—in the same way his stories for children do—that, on looking at the photographed face of a youth one sees, as if in a mirror, one's own.

## NOTES

1. The studio of the pre-eminent New York photographer Napoleon Sarony took twenty-seven portraits of Wilde at the beginning of his lecture tour of the USA in 1882. The majority of the albumen silver prints on glass negatives were taken at Sarony's studio at 37 Union Square on 5 January 1882.
2. Comparatively little attention has been paid to Wilde's interest in photography. There are, however, exceptions, including Daniel Novak, "Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility: Wilde, Identity, and Photography," in Joseph Bristow, ed., *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), 63–95, and Novak, Chapter 4, *Realism, Photography and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Novak reads *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as "a fiction about photography" and Wilde's interest in photographs after his release from prison "as an extension of his own literary picture." More recently, Peter Stoneley has examined the relationship of Wilde to photography in the context of "mugshots" of Wilde's fellow inmates, especially Henry Bushnell, in the photographic albums of the Reading Prison archives. See "'Looking at the Others': Oscar Wilde and the Reading Gaol Archive", *Journal of Victorian Culture* 19, no. 4 (2014): 457–80.
3. Charles Baudelaire, "The Modern Public and Photography," first published in *Le Boulevard* (14 September 1862), reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 83–89.
4. See Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children and Nineteenth Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), and Lewis Carroll: *Photography on the Move* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015).
5. James Henry Leigh Hunt, "Deaths of Little Children," *Indicator*, 5 April 1820: 160–61.
6. Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), and "Taken from Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain 1860–1910," *History of Photography*, 30, no. 4 (2006): 309–45. See also Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
7. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 96.
8. See John Hannavy, *Case Histories: The Packaging and Presentation of the Victorian Photographic Portrait 1840–1875* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 2005).

9. See Marta Braun and Hope Kingsley, *Salt and Silver Early Photography 1840–1860 from the Wilson Centre for Photography* (London: Mack: 2015), 31. This volume was published on the occasion of the exhibition, *Salt and Silver*, Tate Britain, 25 February–7 June 2015.
10. Frederick Scott Archer's negatives on glass could be used to make albumen prints on paper or glass collodion positives, or ambrotypes.
11. Charles Darwin, *On the Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, with Photographic and Other Illustrations* (London: John Murray, 1872). See, for example, the collection of Rejlander's photographs of children at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York 14607, [www.geh.org/fm/rejlander/HTMLSRC/](http://www.geh.org/fm/rejlander/HTMLSRC/).
12. See, in particular, Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).
13. Henry Herschel Hay Cameron established a portrait studio at 70 Mortimer Street in London in 1886. Celebrated for his portraits, and with subsequent studios at 20 Mortimer Street and Hanover Square, he practised as a photographer until 1902 when he turned to a career on the stage.
14. Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), 243.
15. This photograph is reproduced in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), Fig. 53.
16. Oscar Wilde, "The Young King," in Wilde, *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. John Sloan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 141–53.
17. Wilde, "The Young King," 141; Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*, 65.
18. Wilde, "The Young King," 144.
19. Wilde, "The Young King," 143.
20. Wilde, "The Young King," 150.
21. Wilde, "The Young King," 152.
22. Wilde, "The Young King," 152.
23. Simeon Solomon, *Sacramentum Amoris*, original watercolour dated 1868. The British Museum holds a pencil study for the lost watercolour (33.5 cm × 20.1 cm) made in the same year.
24. Frederick Richards Leyland (1831–1892) was a Liverpool-born ship owner and art collector and a leading patron of the Pre-Raphaelite group. For a discussion of the correspondence between Leyland and Solomon concerning the painting, see Colin Cruise et al., *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Merrell; Birmingham: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2005): 53–54. Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Simeon Solomon: Notes on His 'Vision of Love' and Other Studies," *Dark Blue* 1 (July 1871): 574.

25. Frederick Hollyer (after Simeon Solomon), *Sacramentum Amoris*, photographic print (24.8 cm × 14.8 cm), Victoria and Albert Museum; and Solomon, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (London: F.S. Ellis, 1871).
26. Solomon, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*, 72, cited in Colin Cruise et al., *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Merret; Birmingham: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2005), 156.
27. Wilde, "The Young King," 152.
28. Wilde, "The Young King," 153.
29. Holland, *Son of Oscar Wilde* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 102–03.
30. Holland, *Son of Oscar Wilde*, 103.
31. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 13. Wilde notes in a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas an occasion in September 1894 when, renting a house in Worthing, and taking Cyril to watch entertainers called the "vagabond singers," enthusiastic onlookers mistook the child for Douglas (*Complete Letters*, 608). In the context of figures of Narcissus, Wilde's report of this mistake acknowledges the attraction of love for a youth and the beauty of his son as a reflection of his own.
32. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 1–7.
33. Wilkinson attended Radley School from 1895 to 1899. He and Wilde never met, but following their correspondence Wilkinson was one of the few mourners to send a wreath on the occasion of Wilde's funeral. He maintained an interest in Wilde throughout his life and was involved in the Wilde centenary celebration of 1954, serving on the committee responsible for erecting a commemorative plaque at Wilde's Tite Street house in Chelsea. See Ellen Crowell, "Mr. Gielgud Regrets: Panic at the Wilde Centenary," *Center & Clark Newsletter*, UCLA Center for 17th- and 18th-Century Studies, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 50 (2009): 12–15.
34. It was at Radley that fifteen-year-old Cyril Holland learned of his father's death. Citing a letter from his brother to Robert Ross, Vyvyan Holland recounts this occasion on which Cyril had to immediately internalise his grief. Cyril writes to Ross: "I first read of his death in a paper at breakfast and luckily one cannot realise so great a loss in cold print or I don't know what I should have done ... And yet the ordinary person reads it without emotion and quite dispassionately" (*Son of Oscar Wilde*, 153).
35. The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin holds the largest collection of Wilkinson's papers. The Louis Umfreville Wilkinson Collection 1916–1960 (MS-4521) contains sixty-seven holograph notebooks chiefly relating to the author's published fiction and non-fiction.

36. Louis Marlow, *Seven Friends: Oscar Wilde, Frank Harris, Aleister Crowley, John Cowper Powys, T.F. Powys, Llewellyn Powys, William Somerset Maugham* (London: The Richards Press, 1953), 7. Wilkinson adds in this context: "I cannot regret my lies that were rewarded by letters that are impressed, as almost all Wilde's letters are, however casually, by his 'image and superscription.'" (8).
37. Oliver Marlow Wilkinson, *The Mystic Leeway: Frances Gregg First Hand, with an Account of Frances Gregg*, ed. Ben James (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 25.
38. See Louis Umfreville Wilkinson: An Inventory of his Collection at the Harry Ransom Center <http://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findin-Aid.cfm?eadid=00245>.
39. Marlow Wilkinson, *The Mystic Leeway*, 25.
40. Wilde, "To Reginald Turner," [3 January 1899,] in *Complete Letters*, 1118.
41. Wilde, "To Robert Ross," [?12 January 1899,] in *Complete Letters*, 1118.
42. Wilde, "To Louis Wilkinson," 28 December 1898, in *Complete Letters*, 1113.
43. Wilde, "To Louis Wikinson," [3 February 1899,] in *Complete Letters*, 1122. In a letter to Wilkinson with a postmarked receipt of 28 November 1899, Wilde begins almost immediately with the following request: "Do send me your new photograph" (*Complete Letters*, 1168).
44. Wilde, "To Louis Wilkinson," [2 November 1899,] in *Complete Letters*, 1167.
45. Wilde, "To Louis Wilkinson," [4 January 1899,] in *Complete Letters*, 1169.
46. Wilde, "The Disciple," in Wilde, *Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 7 vols. to date (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–continuing), 1:172.
47. Wilde, "The Disciple," 1: 172.
48. Wilde, "The Disciple," 1: 173.
49. Wilde, "The Disciple," 1: 173.
50. Wilde, "To Robert Ross," [22 April 1900,] *Complete Letters*, 1183.
51. "I think that I was intended to be a photographer" (Wilde, "To Robert Ross," 14 May 1900, in *Complete Letters*, 1187).
52. Merlin Holland, *The Wilde Album* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), 183.
53. See, for example, Risto Sarvas and David M. Frohlich, *From Snapshots to Social Media—The Changing Place of Domestic Photography* (London: Springer-Verlag, 2011), 47–81.



54. See Gil Pasternak, "Taking Snapshots, Living the Picture: The Kodak Company's Making of Photographic Biography," *Life Writing*, 12, no. 4, (2015): 431–46.
55. Wilde, "To Robert Ross," 16 April 1900, in *Complete Letters*, 1181.
56. Wilde, "To Robert Ross," 21 April 1900, in *Complete Letters of*, 1183.
57. Wilde, "To Robert Ross," 14 May 1900, in *Complete Letters*, 1187.
58. Wilde, "To Robert Ross," [? 27 June 1900,] in *Complete Letters*, 1190.
59. Wilde, "To Mrs. Bernard Beere," [c.2 June 1897,] in *Complete Letters*, 875.

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