

## IMAGES OF THE DOOR IN TONO-BUNGAY

by John Hammond

Wells's celebrated short story "The Door in the Wall", which makes extensive use of the door as an image of the threshold between the conscious and unconscious mind, was first published in July 1906. Work on the writing of *Tono-Bungay* began in the same year and it seems reasonable to infer that that composition of "The Door in the Wall" coincided with a period when Wells was turning his thoughts increasingly to the creation of a major autobiographical novel. In this essay it is proposed to examine the way in which Wells makes use of the door as an imaginative motif in *Tono-Bungay*.

There is a key passage in the opening chapter in which the narrator describes a door separating the "upstairs" from the "downstairs" world:

The book-borrowing raid was one of extraordinary dash and danger. One came down the main service stairs – that was legal, and illegality began in a little landing when, very cautiously, one went through a red baize door.... That door was the perilous place; it was double, with the thickness of the wall between... (Bk 1, 1,5)

Here one can see the door employed as a metaphor for the barrier separating the young George from the imaginative world of his dreams. On the one side is the downstairs world in which George as the housekeeper's son properly belongs; this is the domain of legality, duty, conformity. On the other side of the door is the world of culture which George desires: the works of Plato, Plutarch and Gibbon, through which he aims to acquire "pride and self-respect, the idea of a state and the germ of public spirit". The books in the saloon of the great house symbolise for the youthful narrator the world of culture and refinement that his status in life denies him. What divides him from the education he covets is a door in the wall, a double door, coloured red. The fact that it is double reinforces the difficulty of the transition George aspires to; he is well-aware that by passing through it he is transgressing the rules and risks punishment. In the language of dreams, red represents the world of emotion. From the narrator's point of view all that lies beyond the door is the world of the imagination: classical literature as the emblem for the mental emancipation he yearns for, and in contrast to the limited, stereotyped world he would have without learning.

*Tono-Bungay* is permeated with images: "Everybody who is not actually in the shadow of Bladover is as it were perpetually seeking after lost orientations". This

sense of loss forms a powerful undercurrent in the narrative and at one point leads Wells to repeat an image from "The Door in the Wall":

There stretches away south of us long garden slopes and white gravestones and the wide expanse of London, and somewhere in the picture is a red old wall, sunwarmed, and a great blaze of Michaelmas daisies set off with late golden sunflowers and a drift of mottled, blood-red, fallen leaves. It was with me that day as though I had lifted my head suddenly out of dull and immediate things and looked at life altogether. (II, 1,3)

"The Door in the Wall" is the story of a prominent politician, Lionel Wallace, who is haunted by a childhood memory of a door leading to an enchanted garden and a dream-like experience of happiness. Wallace places great emphasis on the fact that on the pavement outside the door were fallen horse-chestnut leaves, from which he deduces that his childhood adventure must have taken place during October. All his life he is tormented by the memory of the door and his lost happiness, a torment which ends when he steps through a door over a deep excavation (in the mistaken belief that this will lead to the enchanted garden) and falls to his death. Wells echoes the image of the wall and the fallen leaves in *Tono-Bungay* and in the picture of the "red old wall, sun-warmed, and a great blaze of Michaelmas daisies set off with late golden sunflowers and a drift of mottled, blood-red, fallen leaves" which brings together a cluster of imagery suggestive of autumn and loss. The wall symbolises the idea of a barrier and the narrator's failure to attain the contentment he seeks. George seeks his fulfilment in *Tono-Bungay* in his love for Marion, in his experiments with flying machines, his love for Beatrice and finally in the manufacture of destroyers. Each of these proves to be illusory; the happiness he aspires to continually eludes him. In the symbolism of dreams the leaf is traditionally interpreted as an allegory of happiness, and through his emphasis on the mottled, fallen leaves, Wells symbolises George's loss. Each path to fulfilment is closed to him; each satisfies for a time and then shrivels away. Moreover, the leaves are red, symbolising passion or emotion. Neither in his marriage nor outside it does George achieve a satisfactory love relationship and the story of his emotional life is one of frustration and disappointment. Always he is mocked by his impossible ideal.

As if to underline the significance of his reference to the wall, Wells concludes the paragraph with the sentence: "It was with me that day as though I had lifted my head suddenly out of dull and immediate things and looked at life altogether". From the context, the reference is to the conversations on life and philosophy with his friend

Ewart which immediately precede the paragraph, but the deliberate echoing of the language and imagery of "The Door in the Wall" – a story saturated with the idea of loss – leaves little doubt that the short story was uppermost in Wells's mind. October, Michaelmas daisies, late golden sunflowers, blood-red leaves – all are suggestive of autumn and the decay and decline associated with the season. *Tono-Bungay* is in one sense a fantasia on the theme of England in decline, the decline of the age of certainty and its replacement by the age of confusion.

In an important passage in "How I stole the Heaps of Quap from Mordet Island" (Book 3, Chapter 4.2) there are repeated references to a door in the wall. Beatrice Normandy arranges an assignation with George, saying "At the back of the house is a garden - a door in the wall - on the lane". The phrase is repeated on the following page when George states that he was "at the door in the wall with ten minutes to spare". The word "door" recurs with insistent frequency in the succeeding paragraphs:

So we talked; at last very wet, still glowing but a little tired, we parted at the garden door...  
She stood in the doorway a muffled figure with eyes that glowed...  
"Yes, Go!" she said, and vanished and slammed the door upon me.

The repetition of "door" and "doorway" reinforces the image of a threshold separating the narrator from the woman he loves. The world beyond the doorway – the country lane along which they are walking at night – is described as "this wild dark place", "shadows", "dead and gone". This dark world is contrasted with the romance and mystery symbolised by the enigmatic Beatrice; the account of their conversation is saturated with such terms as "love", "imagination", "magic", "emotion", "delight", "glow". When finally he has to part from her at the door he is left "alone like a man new fallen from fairyland in the black darkness of the night".

George's situation on the eve of his departure for Mordet Island is his boyhood situation at Bladesover House writ large. As a child a doorway divides him from legality and duty on one hand and emancipation on the other. As a man in love with Beatrice his life still falls into two parts. On the one hand his duty clearly lies in the expedition to Africa to try to save the Tono-Bungay empire. On the other he is torn by his desire for Beatrice and all she represents: mystery, romance, imagination. The door separating him from Beatrice aptly symbolises the dichotomy in his life between duty (his loyalty to his uncle) and romance (his yearning for Beatrice).

Neither George nor Wells in his own person satisfactorily resolved this tension between the world of the intellect and that of emotion, between the rational and the imaginative.

Wells's  
1 < | Both "The Door in the Wall" and *Tono-Bungay* need to be read with care for the insight they provide into Wells's imaginative concerns. In both the short story and the novel, the door stands as a symbol for the threshold separating the two dominating forces of his life: the quest for scientific truth and the equally powerful desire for creative fulfilment. Both Lionel Wallace and George Ponderevo are divided selves; each embodies that contradiction between intellect and emotion which fractures all Wells's work and yet, paradoxically, animates his finest work.