

are while we are alive, nor what we
have to do.

When I first began my advanced graduate work, one of life's jokes placed me in Ithaca, New York, studying alone, without much money, and my family back in Maine, working to help me financially and to provide a way to what we all thought of as our life's work, the act of teaching and instruction. Late at night, drained by the preparation for my impending comprehensive examinations, wandering in the library hoping to find something which would stimulate sleep, I looked up at a little shelf filled with books by H.G. Wells. I knew the early scientific romances well and had found *The Outline of History* a great help to understanding my earlier world as a sailor in the U.S. Navy. As I scanned this shelf of unknown titles, *Babes in the Darkling Wood* captured my eye. I pulled it off the shelf and began to read that lead essay on the purpose of writing.

Some time later, the custodians came and told me that the building was closing, but I could take the book with me. I read through the night, and returned at the end, to the lead essay. At that moment I knew what my life's work must be – to provide as clear an access to truth as possible, no matter what that truth might be. In a sense, one needs to use the tool of Occam's razor on all intellectual effort. However, I also knew that one had a duty to produce as beautiful a product as possible and THAT THERE WAS NO NECESSARY DISTINCTION in these two goals. The ends did, and must, justify the means. But the means must always have the ends in view, or the end is smoke – vapor and vagrant.

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A Tale of Two Cities: H.G. Wells's *The Door in the Wall*, Illustrated by Alvin Langdon
Coburn

"Our business is to see what we can and render it," writes H.G. Wells about himself and the photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn. The sentence, which appears on the first page of the presentation copy of *First and Last Things*, is the caption to a small caricature-drawing in which Wells depicts himself and the photographer at work in their respective activities. Wells's words seem to hint at a close collaboration and to a shared aesthetic creed. In fact, the two authors only worked together on two occasions: in 1910 H.G. Wells wrote a preface to Coburn's book of pictures, *New York*, and in 1911 Wells published a special edition of *The Door in the Wall and Other Stories*, a collection of tales written between 1894 and 1906 and illustrated with Coburn's photographs.¹

On considering Wells's and Coburn's lives and work, it seems difficult to believe that they might have shared any common goals. Coburn, an American expatriate, was born into the upper-middle class and had an allowance which permitted him to live at ease without having to earn a regular income. A member of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession movement in New York and of the "Linked Ring Brotherhood" in Britain, he was an advocate of pictorial photography. He studied Japanese art and Taoism and was interested in Swedenborgian theories. After a brief encounter with socialism through his friend, Frank Brangwyn, and George Bernard Shaw, he became a freemason, entered the Rosicrucian order and eventually joined the Welsh church. He admired Maeterlinck, the symbolist writer, whom he met in London in 1915, and believed that "Art is life and life is Art, and there is no difference in the twain."² Wells, on the other hand, came from a family on the verge of poverty and had freed himself from his apprenticeship as a draper through winning a scholarship to the Normal School of Science in London, where his mentor was the Darwinist, Thomas Huxley.³ He cultivated a lifelong interest in science, particularly in biology, rejected religious belief, was for a period a member of the Fabian

¹ The book was first printed in 1911 in Baltimore by Mitchell Kennerley, Arnold Bennett's brother-in-law and a friend of Stieglitz. Only three hundred in the original issue were printed with actual gravure photographs; a further three hundred were illustrated with aquatones. Fifty of these were made available for the English market under the imprint of Grant Richards.

² A.L. Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn Photographer. An Autobiography*, ed. Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p.100. Further references to this text will be abbreviated to CPA.

³ David C. Smith, *H.G. Wells. Desperately Mortal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p.51.

Society and associated himself with writers like Arnold Bennett and George Gissing, defined as 'Realists' or 'Naturalists'.⁴

A first glance at the volume *The Door in the Wall* offers a similarly striking contrast: Wells's stories⁵ portray characters experiencing often extreme emotions, on the border between life and death, sanity and madness, while the photographic illustrations show misty and poetic views of gardens, and glimpses of a quiet, empty, almost idyllic London. To try and understand the extent of the collaboration, and the reasons that brought the author and the photographer together, it seems to me important to dedicate some attention to the interest that both artists had in the representation of the city.

Coburn had already taken up a similar project: in 1906 he began working with Henry James on the realisation of the frontispieces to the New York Edition of his novels. According to Coburn, James took a very active part in the photographer's work, providing precise descriptions of places in detail and of the sort of atmosphere which the photographs should illustrate.⁶ Wells's attitude seems to have been very different. As Jeffrey A. Wolin tells us in his afterword to the 1980 edition of *A Door in the Wall*, Wells had no precise image in mind and left Coburn almost completely free in the choice of the stories that better lent themselves to illustration.⁷ They did, however, meet regularly and together made the final selection of illustrations. A lot of attention was devoted to the printing process: Coburn personally supervised the production of the photogravures, while the publisher imported handmade paper from France and commissioned a specially designed typeset, as he felt that "there needed to be a careful blending of text, illustration, and typography for the work to be harmonious."⁸ This urgency on the part of the publisher to find an external device to harmoniously combine text and illustrations seems to betray a doubt about the effectiveness of this collaboration, a doubt that seems to be confirmed by the recent publication history of Wells and Coburn.

⁴ Walter Allen, *The English Novel. A Short Critical History* (London: Penguin, 1958), p.299.

⁵ The stories included in the volume are: 'The Door in the Wall', 'The Cone', 'The Diamond Maker', 'A Moonlight Fable', 'The Country of the Blind', 'A Dream of Armageddon', 'The Lord of the Dynamos' and 'The Star'.

⁶ See Coburn's account of the project in *CPA*, pp.52 and 60; and Ira B. Nadel, 'Visual Culture: The Photo Frontispieces to the New York Edition,' in *Henry James's New York Edition. The Construction of Authorship*, ed. David McWhirter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp.90-108.

⁷ H.G. Wells, *The Door in the Wall and Other Stories*, illustrated by A. L. Coburn, afterword by Jeffrey A. Wolin (Boston: David R. Godine, 1980), p.155.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.157.

In 1909 Coburn had started working on a project for a London book to illustrate Arthur Symons's *London, a Book of Aspects* but, as a result of a disagreement about the publisher, the project never reached the readers. Symons and Coburn published their works separately, and only two privately printed copies of the original text exist.⁹ The published version of Coburn's *London*, with 20 plates, features an introduction by Hilaire Belloc, whose socio-political discourse fails to address the photographs themselves. The text focuses on the administrative problems of London's suburban growth and on the lack of urban planning – a major subject of debate at the Fabian Society – which was causing a widespread incorporation of neighbouring villages into a belt of poor suburban districts. "He completely ignored my pictures!" was Coburn's comment to Belloc's text.¹⁰ The fracture between the two agendas was indeed very deep: Coburn's aim in landscape photography was "always to convey a mood and not to impart local information."¹¹ He was trying to illustrate Symons's London, a city of hidden corners and of mysterious atmosphere, a city with a character and a personality that the artist had to investigate and, above all, be able to feel.

Coburn's photographs do not show London in terms of Belloc's discourse. There is no hint of its social and urban problems, its poverty and squalor. Let us consider for example the view of Wapping (Fig.1): the only vague signs of the activity and the social conditions of the infamous port area on the Thames are the presence of the barge and the silhouettes of the chimneys in the background, but they are deprived of their context and, thus, become mere elements of a carefully balanced composition. The picture has a highly graphic quality, based on the subtle geometric interplay of the slant lines in the foreground and of the dark silhouettes and the irregular skyline of the industrial area in the background. It is the essential abstract pattern of Japanese prints, rather than the bustle of the London port, which characterise this view.

Wells's personal and political interest in London was very much of the same nature as Belloc's: many of his works, even if in the form of utopias, deal with the problems linked to the issues of urban planning and development, and of the impact of city life on human relationships.¹² He joined the public debate on this issue between 1902

⁹ Arthur Symons, *London. A Book of Aspects*, privately printed for A.L. Coburn and E. Brooks, (Minneapolis: 1909/1914). Further references to this text will be abbreviated to *BOA*.

¹⁰ Quoted in *CPA*, p.74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.44.

¹² See amongst others: *Anticipations* (1901), *A Modern Utopia* (1905; especially 'A Few Utopian Impressions' and 'The Bubble Bursts') and *The Food of the Gods* (1904).

and 1904 with a series of published articles, analysing the traffic situation, government and urban growth in London and gave (in 1903) a lecture to the Fabian Society, of which Belloc was also a member, about the "Question of Scientific and Administrative Areas," criticising Belloc's theories. Specifically, Wells disagreed with Belloc's praise of the virtue of localism and small community values on the basis of the realisation that improvement in communications inside and outside of the city had brought about a change in scale of human relationships and enterprises which could not be reversed.¹³

Given the common interest in the theme of the city, why did Wells decide for Coburn's pictures – products of such a different aesthetic vision? And why did he decide to use photographs instead of graphic illustrations? In her study on Henry James's New York Editions, Ira Nadel suggests that photographic illustrations were for James a means of increasing the saleability of his work and of appealing to a modern public with a new literary taste. At the same time, without competing with the artistic status of the written word, as painted illustrations would do, they constituted a sort of physical, convincing counterpart to the fictional world they were illustrating: "the fiction would seem to possess a reality that the photographs, with their pictorial basis, anticipate."¹⁴ It is difficult to know whether or not the collaboration had been suggested for purely commercial reasons, but even so, it is certainly interesting to investigate the subtext that this collaboration has created, and how it has affected the photographic and the textual message in the book. I am going to attend to Ira Nadel's second suggestion about the authoritative power of photography, in order to analyse how photographs could be seen as a part of Wells's narrative strategy, and subsequently examine how Coburn's view of the city interacts with Wells's.

1 – A need for evidence

Some of the tales in *The Door in the Wall and Other Stories* deal with strange cases and adventures, some are about utopias and dystopias. These parallel worlds, dream-like and apparently removed from the 'normal' world, become part of the protagonists' lives and,

¹³ For further readings on the topics of the lecture and of Wells's polemic against Belloc about the problems of urban growth, see: Ken Young and Patricia L. Garside, *Metropolitan London. Politics and Urban Change. 1837-1981* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), especially 'Wells and the New Urban Region,' pp.107-117.

¹⁴ Nadel, p.94.

eventually, affect them dramatically. Wallace, in 'The Door in the Wall', dies as a result of his obsession with the mysterious garden; Azuma-zi's illusion about the dynamo having supernatural powers will lead him to murder and suicide; Nunez dies while fleeing the Country of the Blind; and the protagonist of 'A Dream of Armageddon' becomes a prisoner in his own world of dreams and nightmares. In these tales, the extraordinary, unreal dimension of the narrative is paradoxically emphasised and, at the same time, denied by the author's preoccupation to convince the reader of the narrator's own reliability – a strategy which is probably a symptom of what Patrick Parrinder defines as "uneasiness with the utopian mode."¹⁵ Let us take as examples two of the stories, 'A Dream of Armageddon' and 'The Door in the Wall'.

'A Dream of Armageddon' begins with the narrator travelling by train and reading a scientific book about dreams. After seeing the title of the book, a passenger tells him a most amazing story of his two lives – his usual one and one that he only lives at night, in his consecutive dreams. In his "dream-life," set in the distant future, the protagonist is a very important political person who, being in love with a girl, decides to leave his influential position and thus fails to stop a destructive world war which will bring about his lover's death and, eventually, his own. After his "death," his "dream-life" carries on as a life-in-death in a sort of dream-hell, the dream(-life) of Armageddon of the title. The relation between the real world and the dream world is blurred by the passenger's remarks:

'If you call them dreams. Night after night. Vivid! -So vivid... this-' (he indicated the landscape that went streaming by the window) 'seems unreal in comparison! I can scarcely remember who I am, what business I am on...'¹⁶

and, he adds "[in the dream-life] Whatever memory I had of *this* life, this nineteenth century life, faded as I woke, vanished like a dream."¹⁷ At the same time, his dream-girlfriend's face is "the face of a dream."¹⁸ Life is vague as a dream, dreams are more life-

¹⁵ Patrick Parrinder, 'Utopia and Meta-Utopia in H. G. Wells', *Science-Fiction Studies*, vol. 12, part 2 (July 1985), 115-127 (p.115).

¹⁶ H. G. Wells, 'A Dream of Armageddon,' in *The Door in the Wall and Other Stories* (London: Grant Richards, Limited Edition, 1915?), 43-72 (p.44-45). Further references to this text will be abbreviated to *DIW*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.47.

like than life. The mention of the book – Fortnum-Roscoe's *Dream States* – seems to have the double function of triggering the protagonist's urge to tell his story and to provide a fictional scientific background to it, also assessing the reliability of the recipient of the story: the narrator reads scientific books, therefore, he must be credible.

The protagonist's need to prove his own story also emerges from his description of Capri, where his dreams are set. He admits never having been there in his real life, but insists on giving the listener the most precise topographical indications and descriptions of the island's landscapes:

Eastward was a great cliff – a thousand feet high, perhaps, coldly grey except for one bright edge of gold, and beyond it the Isle of the Sirens, and a falling coast that faded and passed into the sunrise. And when one turned to the west, distinct and near was a little bay, a little beach still in shadow. And out of that shadow rose [Mount] Solaro, straight and tall, flushed and golden-crested.¹⁹

His descriptions are also confirmed by the narrator: “‘I know that rock,’ I said. ‘I was nearly drowned there. It is called the Faraglioni.’”²⁰ The choice of Capri – a ‘real’ island – and the insistence on these details are part of a narrative strategy which strives to strengthen its link with reality through giving evidence: the narrator wants the reader to believe his story.

We find the same devices in ‘The Door in the Wall,’ in which the problematic of the diegesis is mobilised from the beginning:

One confidential evening, not three months ago, Lionel Wallace told me this story of the Door in the Wall. And at the time I thought that so far as he was concerned it was a true story. He told it me with such a direct simplicity of conviction that I could not do otherwise than believe in him. But in the morning, in my own flat, I woke to a different atmosphere, and as I lay in bed and recalled the things he had

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.49-50. Further examples in the story: p.55 – about the “Grotta del Bovo Marino” – and p.57, where the protagonist describes the Bay of Sorrento.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.51.

told me, stripped of the glamour of his earnest voice, denuded of the focused, shaded table light [...] I saw it all as frankly incredible.²¹

The narrator doubts Wallace's story, but he cannot avoid trying to “account for the flavour of reality that perplexed me in his impossible reminiscences.”²² Leonard Wallace is dead, and the narrator tries to summarise his peculiar story. Wallace was obsessed by the sight of a green door which he said he entered once as a child: it was the entrance to a magic garden populated by tame panthers, exotic animals, a girl and a woman. The sight of the door haunted him in the most crucial moments of his life, although he always managed to resist entering it, accomplishing his duties and building his career. A few months after telling his friend about the garden, he is found dead on a building site, where the door had been left unfastened by accident. “I do not know,” is one of the narrator's final comments. He is tempted to believe that “Wallace was no more than the victim of the coincidence between a rare but not unprecedented type of hallucination and a careless trap, but,” he admits, “that indeed is not my profoundest belief.”²³

Wallace's narration, like the passenger's in ‘A Dream of ‘Armageddon,’ is punctuated by attempts to emphasise its reliability. In the magic garden a woman shows Wallace a book about his own life: “It was wonderful to me,” he says “because the pages of that book were not pictures, you understand, but realities.”²⁴ The experience had for Wallace an “indescribable quality of translucent unreality” but, he insists, “that is what happened.”²⁵ He is presented as far as possible as reliable, like the narrator – they have studied together at a good public school, they were both very good at mathematics, and have become important and respected adults – but the doubt is constantly brought to the surface of the narrative.

²¹ ‘The Door in the Wall,’ in *DIW*, pp.5-24, p.5.

²² *Ibid.*, p.5.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13.

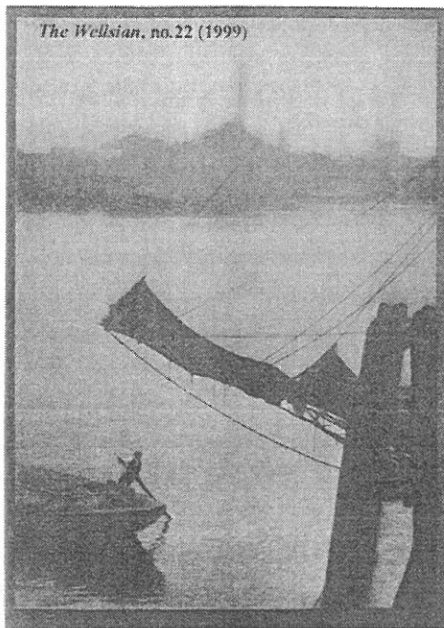


Fig. 1

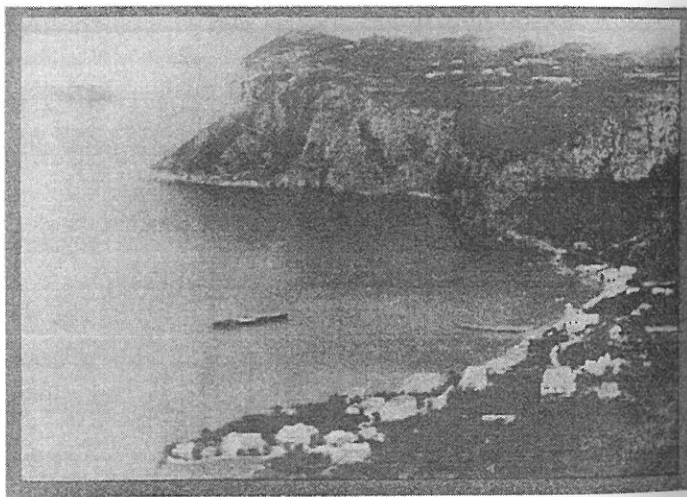


Fig. 2

This continuous shift of emphasis between the real and the unreal is complicated both by the double diegesis and by the presence of Coburn's photographs. Photographs provide evidence: when the book was published (and to a certain extent it is still so), photographs seemed "to have a more innocent relationship to the world"²⁶ than any other medium, they were valued for their ability to convey information and *facts*. Stieglitz, Coburn and the Photo-Secession movement had tried through their work to achieve the status of art for photography, but its authoritative power was never denied. As Roland Barthes puts it, "photography is authentication itself,"²⁷ because "in photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*."²⁸ And yet, Stieglitz and Coburn were famous for intervening in the printing process and for using technical means such as soft-focus lenses and platinum printing to achieve non-realistic effects: the problematic tension between real and unreal seems, therefore, to duplicate itself in the photographic illustrations of the text.

No one can, of course, deny the existence of Capri, and the photographic illustration (Fig.2) to 'A Dream of Armageddon', taken from the top of a mountain, shows one of Capri's bays just as the protagonist might have seen it while standing on the summit of Monte Solaro: its presence introduces a further element of possibility in the balance of the narration. On the other hand, the haziness and dream-like atmosphere of the picture seem to alert the reader of the artistic, and, therefore, artificial, nature of the photographic medium, thus re-enacting the strategy of constant tension between doubt and assertion in the narrative discourse.

In 'The Door in the Wall', the two photographs create a miniature counterpart to the story itself. The photograph of the door (Fig.3) recalls Coburn's *Faubourg St. Germain* taken for James's *The American*, but if the Parisian picture lets us have a glimpse behind the door and gives us information about the sort of building and people that might live behind it, here we are left in the dark. The horizontal planes of the street and the pavement lead the spectator's glance to a door, which looks impenetrable. The branches and plants overgrowing the brim of the wall betray the presence of a hidden garden. We are left to imagine how that garden might look, and to wonder about the reasons behind such a secrecy: we feel the same urge to peep. In a way, we identify with Wallace and share his urge to have a glimpse inside.

²⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), p.4.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), p.86.

The next picture, *The Enchanted Garden*, (Fig.4) shows us a garden – *the garden*? The picture lends itself to many interpretations, as Michael Weaver explains in his study on Coburn's symbolism,²⁹ but how far can this be seen as an implementation of Wells's narrative strategy? The picture is very simple, but its structure, combined with the story, manages to arouse the reader's curiosity, if not to convey a sense of mystery: our gaze is led along the pathway in the background, which disappears in the bushes, while the set of steps on the left are cut off by the frame of the picture. It is as if the author of the picture was deliberately hiding some important information from us. The shadow and the statue in the foreground also arouse our curiosity: somebody or something is about to ascend the stairs, but we are not allowed to know more. The statue has been recognised as Hermes (or Mercury),³⁰ the messenger of the gods. In Greek and Roman mythology he also has the role of guide (he escorted Psyche to heaven for her marriage with Cupid and led Juno, Minerva and Venus to Paris to be judged), and has the power to induce sleep. If we relate these elements with Wells's narrative, we can see how they literally illustrate it: there is a guide, leading to a mysterious and hidden place in a beautiful garden; there is a hint to a state of hallucinatory sleep, which reminds us of the doubts about Wallace's story and, at the same time, the shadow in the foreground seems to *record* the inexplicable, thus becoming an instrument to validate the narrator's belief.

Coburn's photographs, therefore, problematise the difficulties of Wells's narrative: if their very presence seems to support the narrators' attempts to strengthen their credibility, they also emphasise, through the exposure of this very need, the problematic nature of their narration. Moreover, Coburn's technique reenacts this tension by drawing attention to the artistic and non-realistic nature of the photographic medium. From this point of view, text and illustration are closely connected as different outcomes of a similar narrative strategy.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.76.

²⁹ Michael Weaver, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Symbolist Photographer. 1882-1996* (New York: Aperture, 1986), p.57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.57.

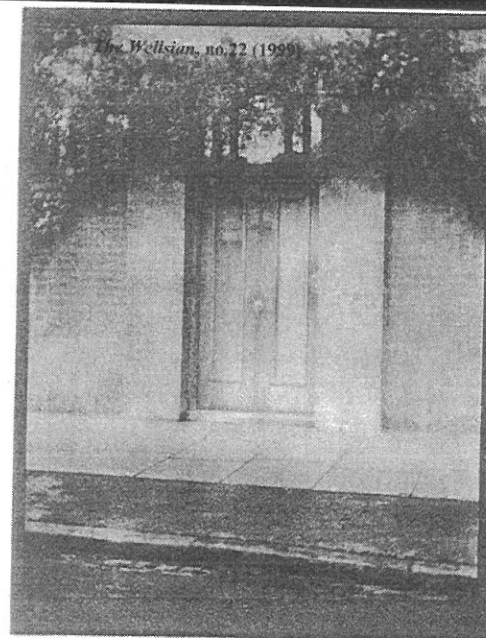


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

2 – A tale of two cities

Another element that might justify Wells's and Coburn's collaboration is linked to the theme of the city. As discussed above, the two authors' interest in and commitment to this issue were fundamentally diverging, but they both directed their investigations towards its complexity, its idea of the city as a threshold between different worlds and lifestyles.

According to Michael Weaver, Coburn's view was influenced by Symons's idea that each city had a character like people, and that profound imaginative insight was needed to appreciate them.³¹ One of London's characteristics that the American photographer tried to bring to the surface was its unknown sides: in a period when public debate was raging about the city's dirtiness, noise, and the effect that its uncontrolled growth was having on the welfare and safety of the urban population, Coburn took pictures like *Fountain Court* (Fig.5), *Regent's Canal* or the previously mentioned *Wapping*, showing an idyllic, secluded and somehow idealised city.³² The atmosphere of such pictures was meant to illustrate Symons's text *London. A Books of Aspects*, which emphasises the city's double character. About Hampstead Heath, he writes:

On the Heath you are lifted over London, but you are in London. It is this double sense, this nearness and remoteness combined [...] from which one gets so unparalleled a sensation.³³

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.34.

³² For further details on the debate that involved politicians, administrators, writers, artists and philanthropists for more than fifty years, see David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones, eds., *Metropolis London. Histories and Representations since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1989); and Young and Garside.

³³ Arthur Symons, *BOA*, p.11.

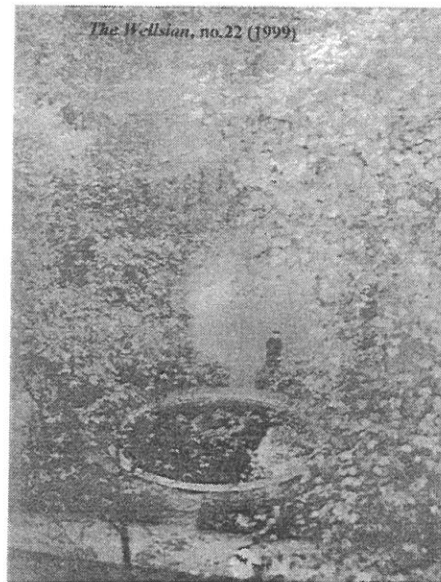


Fig. 5

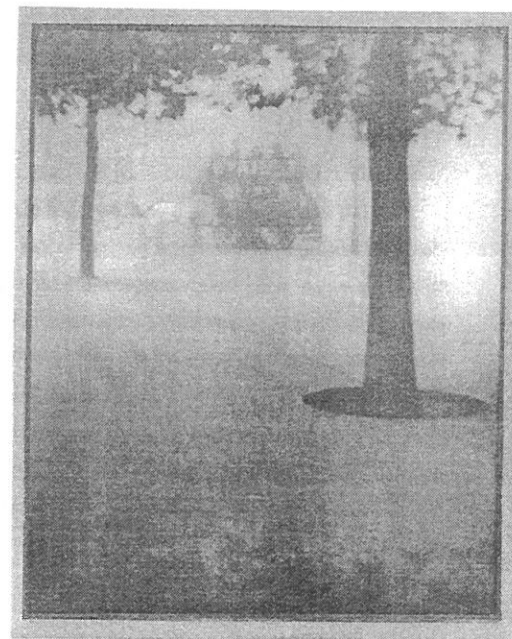


Fig. 6

And, again, he describes entering Fountain Court as a ritual passage through a threshold between two worlds:

There is a moment when you are in Fleet Street, you have forced your way through the long Strand [...], in a continual coming and going of hurried people, with the continual ramble of wheels in the road [...], the dust, clatter, confusion; and suddenly you go under a low doorway, where large wooden doors and a smaller side-door stand open, and you are suddenly in quiet. The roar has dropped, as the roar of the sea drops if you go in at your door and shut it behind you.³⁴

Symons's text is the result of the author's *flanerie*: he experiences the Baudelairian "bath of multitude," he plunges into the city's bustle but is detached; he prefers to live by night and walk around the deserted city. As in Benjamin's portrait of the *flâneur*, he follows a random track around the city, like a detective, but his point of view is fundamentally asocial.³⁵

Following Symons's steps, Coburn engages in a rediscovery of the city (similar to Atget's), and his photographs capture both the character of the commercial, modern, metropolitan London (as, for example in *St. Paul's from Ludgate Circus*) and, more often, its unfamiliar, hidden side, represented by Fountain Court. The point of view is often very distant from the subject, a sign of a detached glance like Symons's, but the use of *The Horse's Bus* (Fig.6) to illustrate a passage in which the writer complains about the noisy streets crowded with omnibuses, carts and machines,³⁶ shows the extent of the photographer's independent and original commitment to his aesthetic project: the noise and the crowded street described in the text are removed. Instead, we see a deserted area with a single horse-drawn bus, framed between two trees and presented as if it was a rare sight. "I am particularly fond of unusual vistas of cities and have spent much of my life endeavouring to discover them,"³⁷ wrote Coburn in his autobiography. This originality, this ability to capture what lies behind the appearance of a city, achieved through patient

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.29.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Der Flâneur,' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, II-1, hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1980), pp.537-569, p.545.

³⁶ Arthur Symons, *BOA*, p.13-15.

³⁷ *CPA*, p. 48.

research and careful isolation of a motif, is, in my opinion, what Wells was referring to in the caption to his caricature.

Wells himself was a careful observer of the city's multifaceted life. David Smith tells us that as a student he used to explore London on foot and that later in life, he insisted, even with bad health, on going out to travel by bicycle to make sure that the descriptions in his books and articles were accurate.³⁸ He lived in many different parts of London, eventually moving out of the city and returning after his wife's death, and developed a deep knowledge of its areas and their social problems.

Amongst the texts that deal with the theme of the city in the form of fiction or essay, *A Modern Utopia* presents the reader with a double city: a 'real London' and a 'Utopian London'. Real London is unbearably noisy; in Trafalgar Square the protagonist and his companion see "a shrivelled, dirty-lined old woman" and "two grimy tramps" by "the dirt-littered basin of the fountain,"³⁹ they meet prostitutes, orphans and drunkards, the representatives of London's explosive marginal population. Utopian London, on the other hand, is the realisation of the architectural dream structures of history; the air is clean, the buildings are bright and spacious, there are thousands of university students and impressive infrastructures. As the protagonists walk along its long, airy avenues, they find themselves "in a sort of central space, rich with palms and flowering bushes and statuary," through which "great multitudes of people will pass softly to and fro."⁴⁰ The protagonists seem to indulge in a sort of *flanerie*: in search of a different London, they walk through the town and observe its inhabitants, ending their stroll in a lush garden, where they will meet their utopian selves.

The pattern of Wallace's and Nunez' movements in 'The Door in the Wall' and 'The Country of the Blind' are strikingly similar: they both encounter their utopian lands after randomly walking, and the first things they experience in them are gardens – a common utopian *topos*. Wallace's first sighting of the door occurs at the age of six while exploring out of boredom the little streets of West Kensington; the second time while playing a game called "North-West Passage," which "consisted in finding some way that wasn't plain, starting off ten minutes early in some hopeless direction, and working my way round through unaccustomed streets to my goal,"⁴¹ the third time while taking an

³⁸ David Smith, *H.G. Wells*, pp.13 and 136.

³⁹ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Dent, 1994), p.212-13. Original edition: 1905.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.145.

⁴¹ 'The Door in the Wall,' p.14.

unusual short cut. Like Symons and Coburn, Wallace moves around the city and looks for his own London, for his own Fountain Court, away from the "long grey streets in Kensington,"⁴² where Wells himself had lived for a period.

The careful topographical descriptions of his stroll locate the enchanted garden in an area that in Wells's time was undergoing major restructuring. Earl's Court, Kensington High Street, Campden Hill were losing their village structure and quickly becoming part of the metropolis. The ancient estates were being gradually dismembered and sold, old mansions were being demolished to give way to new housing projects and to the extension of the London railways.⁴³ It was an area of contrasts: Kensington Palace and Gardens made it a fashionable area for the higher classes, but at its western and northern borders there still stood until the 1880s two of the most problematic of the London slums – the Jennings Buildings, near Kensington High Street, and the Potteries. In her essay 'The Jennings Buildings and the Royal Borough', Jennifer Davis explains that the Bird family, the area's largest brickmakers and owners of the Buildings, were deliberately refusing to improve the conditions of the slums in order to use them as a reservoir of cheap labour for the local building sites and for the prestigious Philmore Estate.⁴⁴

This double characteristic of Kensington is apparent also from Wallace's narration: just before seeing the door he recalls shabby surroundings, a "long grey street"⁴⁵ and

a number of mean dirty shops, and particularly that of a plumber and decorator with a dusty disorder of earthenware, pipes, sheet lead, ball taps, pattern books of wall paper, and tins of enamel.⁴⁶

The mention of a plumber and a decorator, two activities linked with the building industry, might be interpreted as a reference to one of the most common activities which, according to Davis, were associated with the presence of the Jennings Buildings. The garden, on the other hand, is "clean and perfect and subtly luminous" and makes Wallace

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁴³ Lloyd Sanders, *Old Kew, Chiswick and Kensington* (London: Methuen & Co., 1910).

⁴⁴ Jennifer Davis, 'The Jennings Buildings and the Royal Borough,' in Feldman and Stedman Jones, *Metropolis London*, pp.11-39.

⁴⁵ 'The Door in the Wall,' p.12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8.

forget "about the road with its fallen chestnut leaves, its cabs and tradesmen's carts."⁴⁷ Like Utopian London, the enchanted garden is immune from the consequences of pollution and dirt: instead of the yellow fog that had contributed to create the well known images of a mysterious London, Wallace finds himself under an almost Mediterranean blue sky:

It was a world with a different quality, a warmer, more penetrating and mellow light, with a faint clear gladness in its air, and wisps of sun-touched cloud in the blueness of its sky.⁴⁸

Following Wallace's movements in Kensington, it may be possible to read the garden as a metaphor for the Kensington Gardens, which were not far away from the slums: Leigh Hunt and Matthew Arnold, amongst others, celebrated them as leafy and bucolic and, as if in confirmation of its mythical status, a statue of Peter Pan was installed in the park in 1906. Moreover, if we consider the illustration, *The Enchanted Garden*, from this point of view, the enigmatic presence of the statue of Hermes can be explained as a reference to this recent development in the park.

A further element, however, complicates this reading. Wallace tells us about some animals that inhabit the garden: two "great spotted panthers," a "little Capuchin monkey," "paroquets and white doves."⁴⁹ Brian W. Aldiss, in his article 'Wells and the Leopard Lady', suggests that feline figures are often, in Wells's works, either symbols of absolute freedom, because they seem to be immune from the destructive consequences of the evolutionary machine, or of sexual freedom – "Panther" and "Jaguar" being the nicknames which Wells and Rebecca West used during their love affair.⁵⁰ On another level, though, it is possible to interpret them as a further reference to the urban history of Kensington: Lloyd Sanders reports that in 1764 a John Hunter, eminent surgeon and eccentric figure, had bought two acres of land near Earl's Court and built a modest house, a dissection laboratory and a "menagerie of living animals." Amongst them were two

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁵⁰ Brian W. Aldiss, 'Wells and the Leopard Lady,' in Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe eds., *Wells under Revision. Proceedings of the International H. G. Wells Symposium. London, July 1986* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp.27-39, p.30.

leopards, which got into the news when they escaped from their cages.⁵¹ Hunter's house was demolished in 1886, twenty years before 'The Door in the Wall' appeared, and Wells might not have heard of its peculiar history though it seems hardly a coincidence, if we consider the careful topographical indications which characterise the *denouement* of the plot. Also, Coburn himself had explored the subject: his *Sphinx* and *View of Trafalgar Square* show us the presence of feline figures in two crucial areas of the city – the Embankment and Trafalgar Square. Michael Weaver suggests that they might be associated to freemasonic images and symbols, but they also might be read as representations of the hidden, different London that both the photographer and the writer were trying to *render* with their art.

The verb *render* brings us back to the caption in Wells's caricature-drawing mentioned at the beginning of this essay: "Our business is to see what we can and render it." The juxtaposition of "see" and "render" betrays a shift from an objective, empirical mode of perception to a process of transformation of the seen. This, in my opinion, is emblematic of the strategy that we have observed in the stories in *The Door in the Wall* which are characterised by the problematisation of the diegetic structure of the narrative at all levels, involving the continuous attempt on the part of both the author and the narrators to prove their own stories. This strategy, I have argued, was illustrated and exemplified through and by Coburn's photographs.

We can therefore assert that despite their often very diverging aesthetics, Wells's and Coburn's collaboration in the volume *The Door in the Wall* works both from the point of view of structure and content: on the one hand, the photographic illustrations reproduce the constant tensions in the diegetic mode of narration between the real and the unreal, dream and reality; on the other hand, if we consider the representation of the city, both pictures and text show a deep commitment on the part of their authors to investigate the multifaceted aspects of the city and to portray its hidden parts, as if they belonged to a different world.

Ironically, in 'The Door in the Wall' Wallace's search for that other London ends tragically with his death on a building site for the extension of the railway: Wells, unlike Symons (and Coburn), was not able to shut the door and forget about the "real London," but had certainly been able to *see* its "other side" and, like Coburn, had tried to render it.

⁵¹ Lloyd Sanders, *Old Kew, Chiswick and Kensington*, p.271.