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**H. G. Wells's *The Door in the Wall*:
FANTASY OR ROMANTIC REALISM?**

I should like to dedicate this article to the memory of Dr. Andrzej Michalski (1932-2001), Professor of Spanish Literature at McGill University who had introduced me to the concept of *realismo mágico*. J.W.W.

The English novelist Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) is best known for his science fiction fantasies like *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds* or *The First Men in the Moon*. But almost as popular are his realistic, down-to-earth novels of the British working class world of his youth like *Kipps* or *The History of Mr. Polly*. His short story *The Door in the Wall* (originally published in 1911 in a collection of short stories in one volume with his short novel *The Country of the Blind*) is usually considered as one of his fantastic tales. I had first read it in a Polish translation at the age of nine or ten in a collection entitled *Opowieści Fantastyczne (Fantastic Tales)*. Yet the element of fantasy (if by fantasy we mean something supernatural) contained in it is very limited. It is restricted to a hazy recollection by a man in his forties of an experience which had happened to him when he was five years and four months old. And most, although not all, of the strange phenomena he remembers can have a rational explanation. The rest of the story is not only within the realm of possibility, but even of probability. Let us first examine the story at its face value, without trying to unravel its symbolism.

Lionel Wallace, a successful British politician, a Cabinet Minister tells the first person narrator, an old school friend about what he calls a "preoccupation" or obsession he has. I always like to think that a first person narrator in a novel or short story is the author himself, especially if his role is that of a passive listener. In this case however the narrator cannot be Wells, since Wallace calls him Redmond, not Herbert. As a boy of five years (and four months, he remembers this detail) Lionel had wandered off from his home in the London district of West Kensington until he came across a green door in a white wall. Pushed by an irresistible curiosity he opened the door and went in. He found himself in a most beautiful garden where he met some very kind people and two children to play with. It made him exceedingly happy. He had not known such happiness before or since. The garden was huge: He could see the hills far away. In London? No doubt the garden was quite large, but to a small child everything seems bigger than to an adult. He was most impressed by a pair of tame "panthers". They could have been cheetahs, easy to tame and kept as pets by some rich animal lovers, but most probably they were just two big dogs or cats. The little "Capuchin monkey" could have been a squirrel. Thus most of the wonderful things he saw in that garden could have had a rational explanation.

His happy game with the two children was interrupted by a stern but kindly woman who took him inside the house or "palace" to show him the pictures in a book she was carrying. She could have been the mother or the governess of the children. Lionel was most reluctant to leave his playmates, but soon became absorbed in the pictures. They represented his own life: He saw himself and his family in them! How could the pictures of his family have found their way into a strange woman's photo album? Could they have been the photographs of the family which owned the garden? Could there have been pictures of a little boy who looked very much like Lionel and a pair of adults who looked like his parents? But even stranger: "It was wonderful to me, because the pages of that

book were not pictures, you understand, but realities. ... They were realities --yes, they must have been; people moved and things came and went in them."

The "kinetoscope" was invented by Thomas Edison in 1894. However it seems most improbable, in the early years of the 20th century, that the woman was showing Lionel a film, the first film he was seeing in his life, on a home projector. That picture book is the only element in the story for which we cannot find a satisfactory explanation and must attribute it to a child's vivid imagination.

In the last picture in the album Lionel saw himself standing outside the green door in the white wall. He was anxious to get through that door and re-enter the wonderful garden. But the woman was very reluctant to turn the page. At last she yielded to his pressure, but Lionel found himself, to his horror, not in the garden, but in the street, a somewhat slummy street, not the street where the green door was. A policeman brought him home where no one believed his story. His father actually beat him for "telling lies".

If we take his story seriously, as I propose to do, we must conclude that there was a gap in his memory as to how he had left the garden. Maybe he had wandered off into the street (through a different door?) and lost his way? Or his hostess, the sombre woman with the magic picture book had decided it was time to send the uninvited little visitor home before dark? (It was late in the afternoon). No doubt she expected him to find his way and left him in the street with a good-bye kiss.

I find the rest of the story perfectly plausible: For a long time Lionel felt an intense longing for the garden, but eventually forgot about it. Then suddenly, at the age of eight or nine, on his way to school by an unusual route he came across the green door in the white wall! He felt an urge to open the door and have a look, but he did not want to be late for school and passed on. To his immense regret he could not find his way back to that door. He saw it again at the age of seventeen from the window of a cab on his way to Paddington Station to catch the train to Oxford. He signalled to the driver to stop the cab, but looked at his watch and told him to proceed. He could not risk missing the train to Oxford.

The next time he came across that door was on his way to meet his girlfriend. Again he was in too great a hurry (and excitement!) to stop and have a look. He regretted it afterwards. He tells his friend Redmond that he had been in love twice. (Unlike his creator, H. G. Wells, notorious for his many love affairs!) None of his two loves had led to a happy fulfilment. One of the two women had actually told Redmond: "Suddenly," she said, "the interest goes out of him. He forgets you. He does n't [sic] care a rap for you -- under his very nose --" It seems that his real love was dwelling in the mysterious garden.

He saw that door again three times. By then the garden had become an obsession with him, more important than real life. ("I do begin to find life toilsome, its rewards, as I come near them, cheap.") He made a firm decision (in his own words he "swore") to open and enter that door next time he would come across it. Yet he passed it three times without stopping, the first time on his way to an urgent debate in the House of Commons, the second time while rushing to his dying father's bedside.

So far, I would suggest, most, if not all, his excuses for hurrying past the door without stopping, were valid excuses. But the last time he saw it, a week before his confession to Redmond, his excuse was more banal: He was walking with two political cronies, anxious to discuss his position in the Government. And they just walked passed the door. Somehow Wallace felt that he had thrown away his last chance. He was in despair. He tells Redmond:

"'You say, I have success--this vulgar, tawdry, irksome, envied thing. I have it.' He had a walnut in his big hand. 'If that was my success,' he said, and crushed it, and held it out for me to see. ... 'This loss is destroying me. ... My soul is full of inappeasable regrets. ...'"

It has occurred to me, although apparently not to Redmond, to ask Wallace why, if he had no time to open that door and take a look inside, he had not noted the name of the street and perhaps the number above the door. He could then have come back and easily found it in his spare time. Likewise, was he sure he had always passed the same green door? There must have been more than one green door in West Kensington. That would explain why he had felt that the door had appeared to him in different places. Ironically, the original green door could have been repainted a different colour during those years and he may have passed it more than once without recognizing it!

The last thing he tells Redmond is that at night he wanders the streets of Kensington, desperately seeking his door.

About three months after that conversation they found Wallace's body early in the morning in a deep excavation near East Kensington Station where the London Underground Railway was being extended southward. ("East Kensington" Station probably stands for Earl's Court whence a line branches off southward towards Wimbledon). For the safety of the public the shaft was surrounded by a wooden fence, but through a misunderstanding a small door had been left unfastened by the workers. Apparently Mr. Wallace had entered that door, and, in the darkness of the night fell down the shaft to his death. Redmond, perhaps the only person in the world entrusted with his secret (we may discount "Squiff" Hopkins, his untrustworthy school-fellow) assumed that he had mistaken that door for the door to his garden.

I think I have by now demonstrated that *The Door in the Wall* is a quite realistic story of a man's obsession with a hazily remembered incident in his childhood. Had Wallace lived a decade or two later he would probably have consulted a psychiatrist. A Freudian psychoanalyst would have tried to regress his memory, to find out what had really happened in that garden and put his mind at rest by stripping the event of its mystery. A Jungian psychoanalyst would probably have told him that he had had a valuable mystical experience which should enrich his life. Both the Freudian and the Jungian would have urged him to face his preoccupation and not to try to bury and forget it. Open that door, man, and see what lies beyond it!

This brings us to the most intriguing question: What would have happened if Wallace, instead of rushing past, had indeed tried to open the green door? A number of possibilities present itself: He might have found the door locked with no one answering his knocks. A little patience: Note down the address and come back at a later time. Inquire at one of the neighbouring little shops who lives there. Or he might have been confronted by a surprised and unfriendly owner or porter ("Who are you, Sir? What is your business here?") He might have caught a glimpse of the garden and noticed that it was not his garden. He might even have recognised that, yes, it was the right garden, but somehow much smaller and lacking the glamour and magic he remembered. With his obsession killed, he would have been able to carry on with his life without disturbance.

But there is another, more exciting, if rather unlikely possibility: He might indeed have found something behind that door, something that would have changed his life: He might have been welcomed inside, perhaps by the two children, now adults, who had played with him during his first visit. He might have found friendship there; he did not seem to have had many close friends. He might even have found love which had eluded him in his world. Not the tall girl who had lifted and kissed him, she must have been at least a

decade older than him. But we are not told whether his two playmates were boys or girls or, very likely, a boy and a girl. So often our life is changed by a chance meeting!

Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Wells's *The Door in the Wall* is, for all its realism, an allegory and can be read on two levels. Some have felt that the magic garden represents an alluring, but sinister, self-destructive urge within our subconscious. Alberto Manguel (the author of the much acclaimed *A History of Reading*) and Gianni Guadalupi in their *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (New York: Macmillan, 1980) state under the entry to *Door in the Wall* (p. 97-98): "They [the visitors] must be warned that after a certain number of visits the blissful garden may become their grave."

Likewise Gillian Tindall in *Countries of the Mind* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991) describes Wells's story as "one of the most perfect examples in literature of an ordinary-looking door being a gateway to destiny and ultimately to extinction – the final destiny for us all" (p. 194, emphasis mine).

I would suggest that Lionel Wallace's death had been caused not by the garden but by the foolish, almost hysterical way he was looking for it: "At nights--when it is less likely I shall be recognised--I go out. I wander. Yes. I wonder what people would think of that if they knew. A Cabinet Minister ... wandering alone--grieving--sometimes near audibly lamenting--for a door, for a garden!"

The original garden, assuming it did exist, must have been within a five year old child's walking distance from Wallace's family home in West Kensington. Instead of walking the streets of Kensington haphazard at night Wallace should have got himself a map of the area and covered each street one by one until he came across his green door (or made sure it was no longer there, perhaps demolished to make way for some new construction). At daytime, not at night! At daytime he would never have mistaken a temporary wooden fence enclosing an excavation area for a garden wall surrounding a wealthy residence.

Then what does the allegory of the garden represent? Most of us, if not all of us, have a "preoccupation", to use Wallace's own expression, a secret dream or yearning. And our dreams vary. Most common among men is the dream of an ideal woman, what Jung calls the "anima". Or it may be an intense need for poetic or artistic self-expression. Or the dream may be "geographical", a longing to travel and see the Pyramids or the Taj Mahal or to climb Mount Everest. Most men dismiss their dream as childish and impractical, bury it in their subconscious and carry on with the daily business of living, but a sizeable "impractical" minority try to build their lives around their dream. Instead of settling down as accountants or notaries they are determined to become writers or musicians or archaeologists or anthropologists and face the uncertainties of those occupations. Others, outwardly "practical" men suppress their dream for a time, until they can bear it no longer, and then throw all prudence to the winds. Perhaps the best-known case is that of the successful Parisian stockbroker, Paul Gauguin, who at the age of 35 decided to become a fulltime painter. The price he paid was high: abject poverty and break-up of his family. Lionel Wallace belongs to the same category. I find the similarity of names, Wells and Wallace striking. Is Wallace a persona of the author? Would the proletarian and active socialist Wells have chosen the very bourgeois (and probably Conservative) Cabinet Minister Wallace as his persona? But our secret dreams and longings are not bound by our social class or political views. They are dreams and longings common to all of humanity, drawn from the well of our "collective unconscious" as Karl Jung would say.

H. G. Wells had strong, sometimes angry, disagreements with his friend Joseph Conrad. But I think he would have agreed with what Conrad's wise man, Stein tells Marlow in *Lord*

Jim: "I tell you, my friend, it is not good for you to find you cannot make your dream come true for the reason that you not strong enough are, or not clever enough."

Lionel Wallace not strong enough was nor clever enough to make his dream come true, and that destroyed him. Stein's observation is of course an affirmation of romanticism in a nutshell, expressed in very plain words. And this why it strikes us. *The Door in the Wall* is, I have tried to show, a very realistic short story, but its message is romantic. Frederick R. Karl has this to say about Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

"*Heart of Darkness* is possibly the greatest short novel in English and is one of the greatest in any language." (Introduction to the *Danse Macabre: Conrad's Heart of Darkness* in Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*; ed. by Ross C. Murfin. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. p. 123).

If I may permit myself to express a literature lover's opinion I think *The Door in the Wall* is possibly the greatest short story in English and is one of the greatest in any language.

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