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THE SOUL OF THE MATTER:
MAURICE MAETERLINCK, ALVIN LANGDON COBURN
AND THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE FLOWERS

by

Marissa Potvin
BA Honours, Art History, Carleton University, 2007

A thesis

presented to Ryerson University and George Eastman House
International Museum of Photography and Film

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Program of

Photographic Preservation and Collections Management

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2011

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ABSTRACT

Marissa Potvin

The Soul of the Matter: Maurice Maeterlinck, Alvin Langdon Coburn and *The Intelligence of the Flowers*

Master of Arts, 2011

Photographic Preservation and Collections Management

Ryerson University and George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film

The holiday edition of Maurice Maeterlinck's essay *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, published in 1907 by Dodd, Mead and Company and illustrated with four photogravures from photographs by Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882 – 1966), is analyzed in order to address the means by which Coburn's illustrations reflects his antimodernist desire to escape the materialism of early twentieth century society, as this is exemplified through his photographic use of mysticism and floral symbolism. Through an examination of Coburn's publications (notably his 1906 collaboration with the American novelist Henry James) and personal correspondence prior to 1907, as well as secondary sources detailing the history and context of Maeterlinck's publication, it is argued that Coburn was interested in mysticism from the onset of his photographic career, leading to an interest in floral symbolism including its use by the early twentieth century homosexual community, and that all of these factors variously affected his use of symbolic illustrations in Maeterlinck's publication.

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Finally, to each and every person who has had to listen to me ramble in half sentences and broken thoughts over the past year about Coburn and Maeterlinck, you can finally rest easy.

DEDICATION

For my family, in every sense of the word.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A book is a physical object, created in one particular location at a specific moment in time. As though joined by an invisible tether for the remainder of its existence, the object can never be absolutely separated from the period of time in which it originated. Although its history is often forgotten, neglected or even intentionally cast aside, if an individual were to look hard enough, dig deep enough, a book will tell you its story. This is one such story.

Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882 – 1966) (figure 1) was a photographer of many talents and notable friends, for whom the ability to adapt a photographic process to his own needs came seemingly effortlessly. One of the many processes mastered by the young photographer was that of hand-pulled photogravure. Fascinated with the process throughout his career, Coburn supervised the printing of his photographs as photogravures illustrating the work of prominent literary figures such as Henry James (1843 – 1916) and H.G. Wells (1866 – 1946) from as early as 1906, going on to publish compilations of his own hand-pulled photogravures beginning in 1909. Although Coburn developed relationships with many notable figures throughout his lifetime, one now lesser-known individual in Coburn's history is Maurice Maeterlinck (1862 – 1949) (figure 2).

A Belgian poet, playwright, and essayist, Maeterlinck's writing, in all its manifestations, is infused with symbolism, and with a mysticism that guided his life and work. According to Welsh poet and essayist Arthur Symons (1865 – 1945), "the whole

aim of Maeterlinck is to show how mysterious all life is.”¹ Writer and architect Claude Bragdon (1866 – 1946) described him as belonging to “that small Brotherhood of Consolation, who look on men and things with the inner eye of the spirit, and keep open the great road which leads from the seen to the unseen.”² According to pastor and theological essayist Paul Revere Frothingham (1864 – 1926), Maeterlinck believed “that the writings of the mystics are the purest diamonds in the vast treasures of humanity; their truths have a strange privilege over ordinary truths, for they neither grow old nor die.”³ With this belief in mind, Maeterlinck studied the writings of some of the world’s preeminent mystics, believing himself not a singular messenger of mystical principles but simply a descendent in a line of mystics throughout history.⁴

By 1907, Coburn was in the process of illustrating the book that is analyzed throughout this essay: Maeterlinck’s *The Intelligence of the Flowers*. It is clear that the work of Maeterlinck had a profound influence on Coburn, his work, and his life, though this fact was never explicitly stated by Coburn himself. What better way to reveal clues, meanderings and motivations from the early years of Coburn’s career than to ask the object that initially brought the pair together: the book. Published in 1907, *The Intelligence of the Flowers* is illustrated with four photogravures from photographs by Coburn, and a copy is currently housed in the collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library at George Eastman House (GEH), bequeathed by the photographer in

¹ Arthur Symons, “Maeterlinck As a Mystic,” *The Contemporary Review* 72 (1897): 352.

² Claude Bragdon, “Maeterlinck,” *The Critic* 45 (1904): 156.

³ Paul Revere Frothingham, “The Mysticism of Maeterlinck,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (1912): 257.

⁴ *Ibid*, 256.

1967 as part of the Alvin Langdon Coburn collection.⁵ Through its analysis, this essay will address the means by which Coburn's illustration of the publication reflects his desire to escape the rampant materialism of early twentieth century society, exemplified through his use of mysticism and floral symbolism.

In order to fully explore Coburn's aversion towards materialism, the following essay is divided into eight sections. Following the literature review and description of *The Intelligence of the Flowers* (in sections two and three), the debate between science and spirituality that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century is outlined in section four, *Mysticism at the Turn of the Century*, explaining the growth of interest in mysticism by the latter decades of the century, therefore placing Maeterlinck's publication within its appropriate historical context. Section five, *Coburn's Spirituality, 1900 – 1907*, provides evidence of Coburn's leaning toward spirituality as a system of belief rather than science prior to his illustration of Maeterlinck's essay, resulting in his introduction to a form of visual symbolism as a device to escape the reality of materialism through his collaboration with Henry James between 1906 and 1907. The history of floral symbolism in the nineteenth century is subsequently discussed in section six, *The History of Floral Symbolism*, incorporating Alison Syme's recent scholarly

⁵ The entire Coburn collection consists of "over 1700 negatives and 2000 prints of photographs taken by Coburn" housed in the Print Collection, "cameras, lenses and associated equipment" housed in the Technology Collection, as well as personal correspondence, written works, scrapbooks and ephemera housed in the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library along with "copies of all of Coburn's books." For a detailed finding aid of the collection, see Notes on Photographs, "Finding Aid to the Papers and Ephemera of Alvin Langdon Coburn," Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, http://notesonphotographs.org/index.php?title=Coburn,_Alvin_Langdon:_Finding_Aid_to_the_Papers_and_Ephemera_of_Alvin_Langdon_COBURN (accessed August 9, 2011).

writings on the naturalization of non-reproductive sexuality through floral symbolism. This history of floral symbolism provides further context to both the publication as well as Coburn's interest in the subject matter. Section seven, *Coburn's Interest in Floral Symbolism*, describes the connections between Coburn and floral symbolism, as well as his connection to the early twentieth century homosexual community. This interpretation of Coburn's interests further supports Coburn's use of the illustrations in *The Intelligence of the Flowers* to escape materialism and conservative thought by arguing that that Coburn may have used floral symbolism in an effort to naturalize homosexuality in a spiritual manner. The essay concludes with an analysis of the four photogravures used to illustrate *The Intelligence of the Flowers* in section eight, in relation to the two contexts discussed throughout the essay, in order to highlight the ways in which Coburn's interest in both mysticism and floral symbolism were translated into photography.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing scholarship on these subjects is scattered and diverse, as it covers a range of sources concerning Coburn, Maeterlinck, and their joint publication *The Intelligence of the Flowers*. Although primary sources were predominantly used to research this essay's main figures, Coburn and Maeterlinck, secondary sources were required to fill in gaps in context, history, and culture. In this chapter, the decisions made and the sources consulted while researching this essay are discussed in order to

give the reader a better sense of where it and its research fits into the existing body of work produced about Coburn.

In order to understand Coburn, his personality, and his approach to photography and printing, there is no better source than the photographer's own writing – and there is a great deal of it. Coburn was an avid writer, publishing a number of articles in the periodicals of his time on topics such as his projects,⁶ his photographic techniques and methodology,⁷ as well as his thoughts and ideologies concerning art.⁸ These articles inform this essay in diverse ways depending on when they were written. Those written before the publication of Maeterlinck's book in 1907 are used to locate signs of Coburn's interest in mysticism, while articles written after 1907⁹ are used to establish a trajectory of influence and interest throughout the photographer's career. In addition to his articles, Coburn's autobiography¹⁰ provides a retrospective of his life and work, as well as compelling anecdotes that help identify the friends that Coburn kept, the circles in which he moved, and the likely influences that may have emanated from these experiences.

⁶ See Coburn's series of articles detailing his trips to various Missions in California in 1902 such as "The California Missions: San Fernando Rey," *Photo Era* 9, no. 2 (1902): 51-53 and "The California Missions: Santa Barbara," *Photo Era* 9, no. 3 (1902): 116-118.

⁷ See, for example, "Photogravure," *Platinum Print* 1, no. 1 (1913): 1-5 and "Alvin Langdon Coburn, Artist-Photographer," *The Pall Mall Magazine* 51, no. 242 (1913): 757-763.

⁸ Such as "American Photographs in London," *Photo Era* 6, no. 1 (1901): 209-215 and "The Relation of Time to Art," *Camera Work*, no. 36 (1911): 72-73.

⁹ See, for example, "Photography and the Quest for Beauty," *The Photographic Journal* 64, no. 48 (1924): 159-167 and "Retrospect," *The Photographic Journal* 98 (1957): 36-40.

¹⁰ Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography with Over 70 Reproductions of His Works*, ed. Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966).

Traveling further still into Coburn's personal thoughts and activities, a fundamental collection of primary documents exists in the photographer's papers, correspondence, and ephemera bequeathed to George Eastman House and housed in its Richard and Ronay Menschel Library. This collection provides evidence of the writers and artists with whom Coburn was in regular contact, such as George Bernard Shaw (1856 – 1950) and Alfred Stieglitz (1864 – 1946), the interests of those individuals, as well as the ways in which Coburn spent his time, be it photographing notable figures, traveling with friends and family, or taking part in religious ceremonies and rituals.

While Coburn was alive and writing about his work, however, other writers likewise took up Coburn as subject matter, thus preserving information about the reception and contemporary opinions about the photographer and his bodies of work. Of the time period surrounding the publication of *The Intelligence of the Flowers* (from approximately 1902-1913), exhibition reviews are the most common source of information. Although exhibitions are not discussed in this examination of Maeterlinck's book, these reviews reveal that Coburn's work was received in both America and England, almost without fail, in a very positive way.¹¹

The articles and books produced about Coburn since his death in 1966 provide an overview of his photographic career and lifelong passions, including mysticism. Many articles take as their subject the examination of the well-know relationship between

¹¹ See, for example, Sidney Allan, "Exhibition of the Photo-Secession," *The Photographic Times Bulletin* 36, no. 3 (1904): 97-105, George Bernard Shaw, "Photographs By Mr. Alvin Langdon Coburn," *The Amateur Photographer* 43, no. 1114 (1906): 111-112, Frederick H. Evans, "The London Photographic Salon for 1906," *Camera Work*, no. 17 (1907): 30-33 and Sidney Allan, "Alvin Langdon Coburn – Secession Portraiture," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine* 44 (1907): 251-252.

Coburn and Henry James¹² that developed through Coburn's illustration of James's New York Edition. Additional publications focus more broadly on the history of Coburn's career and the personal relationships formed along the way.¹³ Particularly useful for its analysis of Coburn is Aperture's monograph,¹⁴ in which Mike Weaver, then Reader in American Literature at Oxford University and Vice-Chairman of the Photography Advisory Group of the Arts Council of Great Britain, discusses Coburn in regards to his symbolist and mystical tendencies. In addition, a bibliography and chronology of the major events in Coburn's life are supplied in the monograph, providing a helpful starting point for mystical literature, as well as a useful reference for dating activities and publications in Coburn's life.

Throughout the primary and secondary material, three related instances occur in which Coburn and Maeterlinck intersect directly. The first intersection is in a short letter from Maeterlinck to Coburn,¹⁵ dated June 30th 1915, in which Maeterlinck writes to set up a time for Coburn to take his portrait. The second instance occurs in Coburn's

¹² See, for example, Joseph J. Firebaugh, "Coburn: Henry James's Photographer," *American Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1955): 213-233, Leon Edel, *Henry James, the Master: 1901-1916* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1972) and Betsy L. Jablow, "Illustrated Texts from Dickens to James," PhD diss. (Stanford University, 1978).

¹³ See Paul Blatchford, "Alvin Langdon Coburn," in *Alvin Langdon Coburn, 1882-1966: An Exhibition of Photographs from the International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), an exhibition catalog, and Karl Steinorth ed., *Alvin Langdon Coburn: Photographs 1900-1924* (Zürich, New York: Edition Stemmler, 1998).

¹⁴ Mike Weaver, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Symbolist Photographer, 1882-1966: Beyond the Craft* (New York: Aperture, 1986).

¹⁵ Letter from Maurice Maeterlinck to Alvin Langdon Coburn, dated June 30th, 1915. Papers and Ephemera of Alvin Langdon Coburn, Box 8, Item 621, Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House: International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, New York.

preface to his *More Men of Mark*,¹⁶ a series of photographs for which Maeterlinck's portrait was taken on July 2nd, 1915. In the book's preface, Coburn discusses his relationship with Maeterlinck (as he does with each of his 'men of mark'), stating "for sixteen years I was an admirer of the writings of Maurice Maeterlinck before I photographed him."¹⁷ Having photographed Maeterlinck in 1915, it can thus be assumed that Coburn was first introduced to the writer's work around 1899.¹⁸ Finally, Coburn describes the third instance in his autobiography, explaining that following the aforementioned 1915 portrait session, "the great Belgian writer did me the honour of calling upon me to collect his prints, and inscribed a copy of the book I had illustrated."¹⁹ This, however, is the only primary evidence connecting the two men. As this information does not provide evidence as to why Coburn decided to illustrate Maeterlinck's essay in 1907, an analysis of Coburn's interests, in addition to the indirect connections between Coburn and Maeterlinck, create a more complete picture of the joining forces between the two men.

Primary and secondary research on Maeterlinck, on the other hand, focused on acquiring a general picture of the writer's work, beliefs, and writing style in order to clarify Coburn's attraction to the writer. Contemporary biographical texts,²⁰ for

¹⁶ Alvin Langdon Coburn, *More Men of Mark* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1922).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁸ See page 47 for a detailed discussion of Coburn's introduction to Maeterlinck.

¹⁹ Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 100.

²⁰ For example Gérard Harry, *Maurice Maeterlinck, a Biographical Study, with Two Essays by M. Maeterlinck*, trans. Alfred R. Allinson (London: G. Allen & Sons, 1910), Montrose Jonas Moses, *Maurice Maeterlinck: A Study* (New York: Duffield & Company, 1911) and Jethro Bithell, *Life and writings of Maurice Maeterlinck* (London, New York: Walter Scott Publishing Company, 1913).

example, often describe the writer's character, as well as the diversity and quantity of work accomplished by Maeterlinck throughout his career. Maeterlinck's publications, on the other hand, are an invaluable source from which to understand his personal mystical philosophy, as well as the way in which the term mysticism²¹ was understood and received at the time. Although the original editions of Maeterlinck's volumes were published in French, due to his popularity in Western culture at the time of his writing, nearly all of his books were published in English²² and French simultaneously. Additionally, contemporary authors wrote many articles²³ about the mysticism of Maeterlinck's work during the early twentieth century.

Broadening the spectrum beyond the range of Coburn and Maeterlinck, the debate between science and spirituality was gaining momentum throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, generating the context within which *The Intelligence of the Flowers* was published. Sources describing this development are therefore important in placing Maeterlinck's essay within its appropriate context. However, understanding this context becomes difficult when attempting to produce a broad history of the divide between science and spirituality after the mid nineteenth

²¹ For more information regarding the history and meaning of mysticism, see F.C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1963) and Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²² See, for example, *Ruysbroeck and the Mystics*, trans. Jane T. Stoddart (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1891), *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1907), and *The Buried Temple*, trans. Alfred Sutro (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1911).

²³ See, for example, Arthur Symons, "Maeterlinck As a Mystic," *The Contemporary Review* 72 (1897): 349-354, Claude Bragdon, "Maeterlinck," *The Critic* 45 (1904): 156-158, and Paul Revere Frothingham, "The Mysticism of Maeterlinck," *The Harvard Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (1912): 251-268.

century. The problem arises from the large number of societies and organizations that arose on both sides of the debate, such as Spiritualism and Positivism, and the similarities between them. Unfortunately, publications tend to focus on specific organizations rather than survey the entire period. For this reason, introductions and prefaces to books focusing on particular organizations,²⁴ whether scientific or spiritual, are helpful in garnering an understanding of the whole debate. Publications that discuss the entire subject matter,²⁵ on the other hand, tend to do so from the standpoint of scientific naturalism. These are nonetheless excellent sources from which to gain an understanding of the scientific world during this time and the way that it related to spirituality.

In addition to aspects of science and spirituality that are found throughout *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, floral symbolism is likewise an essential component of the book, and the history of its use throughout the nineteenth century helps to inform one of the two contexts of Maeterlinck's book. Of the texts devoted to the symbolic use of flowers in the nineteenth century, most are historical and cultural accounts of floral

²⁴ See, for example, Tom Sorell, *Scientism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), Robert Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Rudolph Steiner, *Madame Blavatsky, and Theosophy: An Eyewitness View of Occult History* (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 2001).

²⁵ See, for example, Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), J.A.V. Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1986), and Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

symbolism and the 'language of flowers,'²⁶ or discussions of the pointed use of floral symbolism in art,²⁷ while one text, *Flora Photographica, Masterpieces of Flower Photography: 1835 to the Present*,²⁸ is dedicated to the discussion of flowers used in photography. These publications provide a thorough and varied history of flowers in art and society, creating an entry point for the discussion of floral symbolism within *The Intelligence of the Flowers*.

Further research into floral symbolism, however, suggests supplementary motives as to Coburn's resolve to illustrate *The Intelligence of the Flowers* with floral imagery. In Alison Syme's recent publication,²⁹ the author discusses the use of flowers and floral symbolism by the Western fin-de-siècle homosexual community as markers or codes, as a covert way of referring to non-reproductive sexuality. Since Coburn scholarship to date does not address the photographer's sexuality (though it is most frequently assumed that Coburn was heterosexual), it can be argued that Syme's premise presents a bridge between Coburn and the early twentieth century homosexual community and the role of Coburn's cousin, F. Holland Day,³⁰ in this respect.

²⁶ See Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995).

²⁷ Ella M. Foshay, *Reflections of Nature: Flowers in American Art* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1984).

²⁸ William A. Ewing, *Flora Photographica, Masterpieces of Flower Photography: 1835 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

²⁹ Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

³⁰ For information about F. Holland Day, his work, and career, see for example Estelle Jussim, *Slave To Beauty: The Eccentric Life and Controversial Career of F. Holland Day, Photographer, Publisher, Aesthete* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1981), Verna Posever Curtis and Jane Van Nimmen, eds., *F. Holland Day: Selected Texts and Bibliography* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1995), and Patricia J. Fanning, ed., *New Perspectives on F. Holland Day:*

The use of primary and secondary sources, which range from biographical and historical to social and editorial, has inevitably led to a multidisciplinary approach to the interpretation of the book. With an understanding of the work and beliefs of Coburn and Maeterlinck, the history and various contexts of *The Intelligence of the Flowers* illuminates the reasons why Coburn was attracted to the book's illustration and his use of floral illustrations as symbols representing his interest in mysticism and his desire to escape a highly materialistic society. This cannot be fully appreciated, however, without a close study of the book as an object.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE FLOWERS

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the name of Maeterlinck was exceptionally well known as playwright and essayist, and over a period of a few years, Maeterlinck would use scientific observation to support his mystical ideas. Continually building his oeuvre, Maeterlinck published his first study of the natural world in 1901 under the title *La Vie des Abeilles*,³¹ published in English as *The Life of the Bee*.³² With the success of his foray into scientific study and observation, Maeterlinck succeeded his first nature study with a collection of essays on nature, politics, and immortality, among

Selected Presentations from the Fred Holland Day In Context Symposium Held at Stonehill College North Easton, Massachusetts April 19, 1997 (North Easton, Mass.: Stonehill College, 1998).

³¹ Maurice Maeterlinck, *La Vie des Abeilles* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1901).

³² Maeterlinck, *The Life of the Bee* (London: George Allen, 1901). For an overview of Maeterlinck's work and the context in which *The Intelligence of the Flowers* was written, see Philip Mosley, introduction to *The Intelligence of Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2008), IX-XXVII.

other things, bearing the title *L'Intelligence des Fleurs*³³ (or *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, in its English incarnation). The eponymous essay in *L'Intelligence des Fleurs* was first published in English as a series of articles in *Harper's Monthly* magazine in December 1906, February 1907 and March 1907.³⁴ Following on its heels, New York's Dodd, Mead and Company published the essay in *The Measure of the Hours*,³⁵ the same collection of essays that formed the French edition of *L'Intelligence des Fleurs*, with the inclusion, however, of one additional essay.³⁶ Ruskin House in London published this same book concurrently, under the title *Life and Flowers*.³⁷ In December of 1907, Dodd, Mead and Company published a "Holiday Edition"³⁸ of Maeterlinck's essay, *The Intelligence of the Flowers*³⁹ – the object of study in this essay.

Differing from the publishing house's previous publications in style and design, the holiday edition of *The Intelligence of the Flowers* is highly decorated by bookplate designer William Edgar Fisher (1872 – 1956). Observable in figure 3, the cover of the book is covered in green paper, ornamented with a floral design and an applied green

³³ Maeterlinck, *L'Intelligence des Fleurs* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1907).

³⁴ C. Stuart Gager, "Science and Poetry – A Protest," *Science* N.S. 25, no. 649 (1907): 908.

³⁵ Maeterlinck, *The Measure of the Hours*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1907).

³⁶ The essay "Rome" was not included in the original French edition of *L'Intelligence des Fleurs*, but was included in both the New York and London editions of the collection of essays.

³⁷ Maeterlinck, *Life and Flowers*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (London: Ruskin House, 1907).

³⁸ *The Intelligence of the Flowers* was included among several of Maeterlinck's other titles as "Holiday Editions," listed in the publisher's advertisement printed in Maeterlinck's *The Buried Temple*, trans. Alfred Sutro (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1911).

³⁹ Maeterlinck, *The Intelligence of the Flowers*.

label stating the volume's title and author. Opening the cover, a similar floral decoration pervades the paste-down endpaper and free endpaper of the front and back, as seen in figure 4. Fisher's decorations fill the porous, textured pages of the book, appearing as a piping herm of pan flanked by pruned rose bushes on the title page (figure 5), and as four variations of a decorative floral border alternately surrounding the text of each page (figures 6 through 9). Though it seems easy to dismiss this decoration as whimsical and superficial, Fisher broke tradition as a bookplate designer in the early twentieth century, using his designs for symbolic and associative reasons rather than to simply beautify the page.⁴⁰ His decoration of Maeterlinck's book was intentional and deliberate, including floral motifs as well as a beehive (see figure 7) and sundial (figure 10), referencing Maeterlinck's previous nature studies.

Coburn illustrated the publication with four untitled photogravures, heightening the symbolism that is already prominent within the book's text and decoration. The frontispiece for the publication (figure 11) depicts three water lilies sitting on the water's surface in a sea of lily pads. The second photogravure (figure 12), facing page 44, shows a cascade of flowers planted in an urn, sitting in a garden bed that is bordered by stone. Figure 13 illustrates the third photogravure, facing page 92, of a meticulously groomed garden vista. This same image was later printed in Coburn's 1913 book *Moor Park*⁴¹ as plate VI, "The Italian Garden." The fourth photogravure in Maeterlinck's book,

⁴⁰ W.G. Bowdoin, "American Designers of Book-Plates: WM. Edgar Fisher," in *Book-Plates of To-Day*, ed. Wilbur Macey Stone (New York: Tonnelé & Company, 1902), 3.

⁴¹ Coburn, *Moor Park* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1913). This publication contains a series of photographs by Coburn of the mansion and grounds of Moor Park, located in

facing page 140, was subsequently published in *Moor Park* as plate III, “The Sun Dial” (figure 14).

Although there is no documentation noting where the first two images from *The Intelligence of the Flowers* were taken, due to similarities in detail, it is possible that all four photogravures were made from photographs taken at Moor Park. In figure 12, for example, the edging of the flowerbed is composed of two long pieces of stone, meeting at the corner with one triangular stone. This same type of stone edging exists in the garden cutting through the middle ground of figure 14, a photograph that was definitely taken at Moor Park. Additional evidence suggests that the frontispiece from *The Intelligence of the Flowers* (figure 11) may have been taken in Moor Park as well.

Although the photograph could easily have been taken elsewhere, water lilies are clearly visible in the pool of *The Dolphin Fountain* (figure 15), plate XII in *Moor Park*, displaying flowers that are well spaced out, as are those in Coburn’s print published in *The Intelligence of the Flowers*.

Likewise uncertain is the year during which Coburn took the photographs used to illustrate *The Intelligence of the Flowers*. Although the book was published in 1907, all four photogravures are undated, and it is possible that the images were taken by Coburn in 1906. In Aperture’s Monograph on Coburn, Mike Weaver explains that Coburn had been introduced to Lady Ebury, owner of Moor Park, by Henry James, and

Hertfordshire, England, a preface by Lady Ebury, who resided at Moor Park in Coburn’s time and was his pupil in photography, describing the history of Moor Park, as well as a selection from the writings of William Temple, seventeenth century author and statesman who was so fond of Moor Park that he named his own property after it.

that the images taken by Coburn of Moor Park might have been made in 1906.⁴² Dr. Francis Ebury, photography and art historian at the University of Melbourne, likewise dates some of Coburn's Moor Park images to 1906, explaining "although Maeterlinck's book came out in 1907, publication lead times make 1906 a plausible date for the photographs."⁴³

It is similarly unclear who was responsible for the inclusion of specific photogravures in the publication, which establish the book's mood and tone. Based on contemporaneous practice, it is possible that Coburn sent the publisher, Dodd, Mead and Company, a selection of prints with which to illustrate the book, leaving the final decision in the hands of the publisher. This theory is strengthened by the existence of three additional photogravures (figures 16, 17 and 18) bequeathed to GEH in the Alvin Langdon Coburn collection. Although the color of the additional photogravures differs from those in Maeterlinck's publication, they were acquired alongside similarly brown-toned versions of the four photogravures used to illustrate *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, leading to the possibility that Coburn had submitted seven images and that three prints were rejected for the publication.

The text and style of the essay itself is likewise intriguing, as it offers a fascinating combination of scientific fact and mystical theory common in Maeterlinck's writing style. In the most general sense, Maeterlinck's *The Intelligence of the Flowers* is a study of flowers. More specifically, it is a declaration of the author's mysticism, a

⁴² Weaver, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Symbolist Photographer*, 28.

⁴³ Francis Ebury, "Alvin Langdon Coburn at Moor Park," *History of Photography* 29, no. 1 (2005): 36.

commentary on the nature of the “genius of the earth,”⁴⁴ Maeterlinck’s term for what Philip Mosley, Professor of English, Communications, and Comparative Literature at Penn State University refers to in his introduction to a 2008 edition of *The Intelligence of the Flowers* as an “all-encompassing spiritual force” that “brings [Maeterlinck] as close to religious belief [or the divine] as he allows.”⁴⁵ Throughout the essay, Maeterlinck describes the “wisdom and ingenuity”⁴⁶ of various species of plants through the description of their pollination and fertilization processes, using precise detail acquired through scientific observation and study. Maeterlinck makes use of the flower’s reproductive process, its composition, mechanics, and evolution over time, as evidence of the intelligence of flowers. He goes on to explain that through this process of perfecting their ability to pollinate and fertilize, flowers are able to overcome their destiny of being rooted to the ground by propelling their seeds away from themselves and, essentially, learning to fly.⁴⁷ Maeterlinck concludes his essay by explaining that it is not the study of the single species of flower that is of importance, but the ways in which that flower reflects, in his words, the “genius of the earth” that flows through it.⁴⁸

Although many different types of mysticism have existed for centuries, mysticism has recently been defined by University of California historian and author Hal Bridges, as the “selfless, direct, transcendent, unitive experience of God or ultimate

⁴⁴ Maeterlinck, *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, 165.

⁴⁵ Philip Mosley, introduction to *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, xxii.

⁴⁶ Maeterlinck, *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 11-12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 154-155.

reality, and the experient's interpretation of that experience,"⁴⁹ such as is found in Maeterlinck's mystical writing. There is not one singular type of mysticism, but rather many different forms as experienced by countless individuals. The mystic, according to Frothingham, is therefore "one who looks within, lives within, and loves to interpret all things from the standpoint of the soul,"⁵⁰ a designation Frothingham publicly applied to Maeterlinck during the latter's lifetime.⁵¹ The message expressed in *The Intelligence of the Flowers* faithfully mirrors Maeterlinck's personal mysticism, which can be aptly summarized through a passage from his 1911 publication *The Buried Temple*. He states: "It is not the incomprehensible in nature that masters and crushes us, but the thought that nature may possibly be governed by a conscious, superior, reasoning will: one that, although superhuman, has yet some kinship to the will of man."⁵² Maeterlinck believed that a general intelligence, comparable to the divine, ran through all things like a fluid.⁵³ By studying and observing this intelligence in one of its many manifestations (such as flowers), Maeterlinck believed that he could more easily come to understand and commune with the "universal genius" of the world.⁵⁴

In every facet of its production and publication, Maeterlinck's book reveals its purpose as a deluxe holiday edition. Created with the intention of being purchased as a

⁴⁹ Hal Bridges, *American Mysticism: From William James to Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 4.

⁵⁰ Paul Revere Frothingham, "The Mysticism of Maeterlinck," *The Harvard Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (1912): 257.

⁵¹ See Frothingham, "The Mysticism of Maeterlinck," 256.

⁵² Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Buried Temple*, trans. Alfred Sutro (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1911), 183.

⁵³ Maeterlinck, *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, 175.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 155.

gift,⁵⁵ the publication is highly embellished and rather feminine, possibly a sign of its being geared towards female shoppers. Likewise a sign of its use, forty-two of the pages in GEH's copy of the book are unopened.⁵⁶ As this book was acquired by GEH as part of the bequest from Coburn,⁵⁷ and was likely the photographer's copy,⁵⁸ the unopened pages may lead to the assumption that Coburn did not read this copy of Maeterlinck. Due to its previous publication in Harper's and other publications prior to the holiday edition, however, it is highly probable that Coburn had already read the essay and owned publications containing it prior to his illustration of *The Intelligence of the Flowers*. This theory is supported by Coburn's interest in mysticism and floral symbolism during the early twentieth century, two factors that likely attracted Coburn to Maeterlinck's work, which are discussed in the next four sections of this essay.

⁵⁵ This particular book was advertised in the December issue of *The Atlantic Monthly Advertiser* 100, no. 6 (1907): 23 under the heading "Beautifully Illustrated and Bound and Especially Suitable for HOLIDAY GIFTS."

⁵⁶ According to John Carter and Nicolas Barker, *ABC for Book Collectors*, 8th ed. (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2004), 226, unopened pages of a book "means that the leaves of a book issued entirely untrimmed (and therefore having the folding of its component sections still intact at the top and fore-edges) have not been severed from their neighbours with the paper-knife."

⁵⁷ A label is attached to the verso of the book's free endpaper, stating "From the bequest of Alvin Langdon Coburn. Collection of George Eastman House." For further information regarding the acquisition of this collection, see Marianne Fulton, "Alvin Langdon Coburn Collection at George Eastman House," in *Alvin Langdon Coburn: Photographs 1900-1924*, ed. Karl Steinorth (Zürich, New York: Edition Stemmlé, 1998), 181-183.

⁵⁸ The copy referred to here, which is currently housed at GEH, is not the copy inscribed by Maeterlinck in 1915, referred to by Coburn in *Alvin Langdon Coburn Photographer: An Autobiography*, 100. Research has not yet located the whereabouts of the inscribed copy.

4. MYSTICISM AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

By 1907, interest in mysticism was common in popular culture, providing the ideal environment for the proliferation and reception of *The Intelligence of the Flowers*. Though the study and propagation of various forms of mysticism had developed over several centuries, a renewed focus was placed on mysticism in the latter half of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth century, encouraging the American public to welcome a book such as *The Intelligence of the Flowers* as a result. One of the main changes affecting this public embrace was the role of science within society and its opposition to nearly all forms of spirituality.

Most studies of the period agree that by the middle of the nineteenth century, a spiritual crisis had developed in many parts of the Western world, leading to a division between spirituality and science, as well as the separation of modern thinkers from their antimodern opponents. As discussed by Dr. Bret E. Carroll, Professor of early U.S. History at California State University, this crisis grew out of "the successive impact first of Enlightenment religious thinking, which encouraged a rational and scientific approach to deity, and then of Romanticism, which called for greater attention to subjective religious insight and feeling,"⁵⁹ leaving the general public unsure of what to think or whom to believe. The results of this crisis were varied and often confusing, as a religious pluralism permeated the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ It became increasingly

⁵⁹ Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 2.

⁶⁰ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 2.

difficult for organized religions to maintain their power against the growing popularity of science and its ability to explain, with quantifiable evidence, life's assorted experiences.⁶¹ Proponents of modernism and that era's technological innovations began to observe and understand the capabilities of science in daily life and the focus that science placed on aspects of materiality. With time, this point of view developed into materialism, whose definition extended to both its scientific connotations of matter being composed of only real and substantial material, therefore denying any life force or divine intelligence in the world, as well as the focus that this belief put on material objects and reality. Antimodern supporters, on the other hand, were drawn to what is termed by American cultural and intellectual historian T.J. Jackson Lears the "ecstasy of the mystic" due to the "sense that modern life [had] grown dry and passionless, and that one must somehow try to regenerate a lost intensity of feeling."⁶² By the turn of the century, materialism was a common subject matter and cause for debate, finding many adversaries in popular culture and artistic circles, including Coburn and his group of friends, mentors and heroes. For example, Joseph Shiffman, Associate Professor of English at Long Island University, discussed the rebellion of Wells, Shaw and Stieglitz (three individuals with whom Coburn was good friends) against commercialism,⁶³ leading to their interest in Maeterlinck as relief from a materialistic society through

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 142.

⁶³ Commercialism refers to an excessive emphasis on profit or monetary gain. Due to its emphasis on physical objects, adversaries of commercialism frequently opposed materialism as well.

spiritual enlightenment.⁶⁴ Due to these important differences between scientific study and spiritual inclinations, most personal opinions and systems of belief following the spiritual crisis fell under one of two classifications: science or spirituality.

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the belief in science's ability to explain the ways in which the world worked came to be known by many names -- scientism, positivism, rationalism, free thought -- however the most common term was scientific naturalism.⁶⁵ Flourishing predominantly between 1850 and 1900, followers of scientific naturalism held that all things were part of nature, existing in a specific time and place. Because scientific enquiry was a way of analyzing the natural world, science could therefore be used for the "expression, explanation and guidance of human life."⁶⁶ This idea was based on the writings and thoughts of celebrated scientists of the time, such as Sir John Herschel (1792 – 1871), who, in 1831, wrote that everything that occurred in the natural world could be explained by a principle of science.⁶⁷ In fact, many changes were taking place within the nineteenth century scientific community, ultimately making way for the public acceptance of scientific naturalism. One such change was rooted in the very nature of what is meant by the term 'science.'

⁶⁴ Joseph Shiffman, "The Alienation of the Artist: Alfred Stieglitz," *American Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1951): 249.

⁶⁵ Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

⁶⁷ J.A.V. Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1986), 147.

Prior to the mid nineteenth century, science was marked by a lack of professionalism and clearly defined boundaries,⁶⁸ allowing for the production and proliferation in popular culture of scientific studies. In due course, the shift towards a more structured discipline caused a break between science and theology, as scientists began to research and focus entirely on their own field of study to answer and elucidate life's many quandaries through scientific explanations alone.⁶⁹ Professionalism in science was, however, still in its early stages. It was therefore possible, and indeed was one of the last times, that science could still be studied and understood by laymen⁷⁰ such as Maeterlinck and his readers. Without need for special training to fully understand scientific theories and ideas, an ideal environment was in place for the propagation of scientific naturalism to the general public.

Although many accepted the shift towards science as a refreshing and enlightening change, there were also those who were not satisfied with scientific naturalism and its tenets, and whose personal inclinations led them down a variety of spiritual paths. Many of these individuals may have believed in science, but simply did not feel that it could answer *everything*.⁷¹ Stemming from the same crisis of faith that led to scientific naturalism, individuals who believed in some form of spirituality made up its opposing camp. The difficulty in now understanding the nature of spirituality during the mid and later nineteenth century, however, is often related to discrepancies in the use of the term 'spiritual.' Distinguished intellectual historian Frank Miller Turner

⁶⁸ Turner, 12.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid, 2.

explains that by the 1850s, the meaning of this term usually “excluded Christian doctrine and ceremony but preserved in a non-Christian context the questions, issues, and problems of human life previously addressed by that faith”⁷² and was often referred to as mysticism. While differing greatly from one organization or religion to another, most spiritual belief systems were based in some form of spirit world and inner consciousness or soul. Such a belief was one of the main differences between scientific naturalism and spirituality. While scientific naturalism was rooted strongly in reality and its materiality, spirituality called for a belief in something that could not be scientifically quantified.

In addition to variations in use of the term ‘spirituality,’ further confusion about the term stems from the multitude of spiritual branches in existence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and whose belief systems sometimes embraced scientific elements. Many spiritual organizations, for example, frequently attempted to furnish scientific evidence to prove the validity of their beliefs.⁷³ Likewise, many scientific organizations began to incorporate spiritual elements into their teachings. It seems that as much as the two opposing views tried to distance themselves from one another, one just could not work without the other. Exemplifying the merging of opposing sides is the premise of a Life Force, developed by distinguished Scottish surgeon John Hunter (1728 – 1793) and first made public by John Abernathy (1764 – 1831), Professor of Anatomy at the Royal College of Surgeons, in a series of annual

⁷² Ibid, 3.

⁷³ Ibid, 117.

public lectures that began in 1814.⁷⁴ The theory suggested that blood contained the secret of 'Vitality,' an invisible substance that was added to matter. Due to the fact that Vitality was *added* to the blood, it followed that it had to have been added by someone or something, in effect scientifically proving the "theological notion of the soul."⁷⁵ Over time, this theory gained a number of followers who came to be known as Vitalists. These individuals believed that the notion of the Life Force explained the very nature of life itself, as well as the existence of the mind, body, and soul, through scientific analysis.⁷⁶

A variant of the Vitalists, Friedrich Schelling's theory of *Naturphilosophie*⁷⁷ gained a small following at the University of Jena in Germany. Author and biographer Richard Holmes in *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* describes this theory, as follows:

This doctrine, perhaps best translated as 'science mysticism,' defined the entire natural world as a system of invisible powers and energies, operating like electricity as a series of 'polarities'. According to Schelling's doctrine, the whole world was indeed replete with spiritual energy or soul, and all physical objects 'aspired' to become something higher. There was a 'world-soul' constantly 'evolving' higher life forms and 'levels of consciousness' in all matter, animate or inanimate. All nature had a tendency to move towards a higher state.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: Harper Press, 2008), 308.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 309.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 314.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 315.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

One notable follower of this doctrine at the University of Jena was Novalis,⁷⁹ a German poet and philosopher who is often cited as a mystical predecessor and influence on Maeterlinck.⁸⁰

Maeterlinck can therefore be linked to the theory of *Naturphilosophie* through Novalis, and this doctrine is found throughout the pages of *The Intelligence of the Flowers*. According to Maeterlinck, “all [flowers] have the magnificent ambition to overrun and conquer the surface of the globe by endlessly multiplying that form of existence which they represent.”⁸¹ Using scientific observation of the pollination and fertilization of flowers as evidence, Maeterlinck imbues the flowers he describes with an intelligence that he compares to a “genius of the earth” that governs all things,⁸² even going as far as to attribute a soul to the flower.⁸³ In these ways, Maeterlinck is following Schelling’s theory that all things possess a soul and energy, and are constantly aspiring to something greater. Consequently, Maeterlinck’s essay *The Intelligence of the Flowers* combines science and spirituality, rather than separating them, in order to validate and explain his mystical theories to his readers.

⁷⁹ Novalis was the pseudonym of Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772 – 1801), more commonly known as Friedrich von Hardenberg. For more information see Friedrich Hiebel, *Novalis: German Poet, European Thinker, and Christian Mystic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954).

⁸⁰ See for example Montrose Jonas Moses, *Maurice Maeterlinck: A Study* (New York: Duffield & Company, 1911), 279, Patrick Mahony, *The Magic of Maeterlinck* (Hollywood: House-Warven, Publishers, 1952), 49 and Jethro Bithell, *Life and Writings of Maurice Maeterlinck* (New York and Melbourne: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., Ltd., 1961), 84.

⁸¹ Maeterlinck, *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, 8.

⁸² *Ibid*, 155.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 100.

As is evidenced by its inclusion in Maeterlinck's essay, the debate between science and spirituality appeared regularly throughout popular literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It emerges, for example, in Mary Shelley's (1797 – 1851) *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* as a combination of science and questioning the existence of the soul⁸⁴ and, to take one further example, in Wells' novel *The Time Machine* as science fiction.⁸⁵ Throughout his career, Coburn befriended and worked with several individuals concerned with this debate, such as Wells.⁸⁶

5. COBURN'S SPIRITUALITY, 1900 – 1907

As with many antimodern thinkers, from approximately 1915 onwards, there is well-documented evidence of Coburn's interest and activity in mysticism and comparative religions. Coburn's photographic career began towards the end of the debate between science and spirituality, at a time when sides were already formed and the debate was highly visible in countless forms of popular culture. By 1919, for

⁸⁴ Holmes, 325.

⁸⁵ Chapple, 48.

⁸⁶ H.G. Wells, *The Door in the Wall, and Other Stories* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1911). From 1906 until approximately 1910, Coburn provided the ten photographs that illustrated Wells' text in the form of photogravures. According to Maarten van de Guchte, Coburn received little or no instruction from Wells in regards to the book's illustrations, as opposed to the collaborative effort between Coburn and Henry James. See *Alvin Langdon Coburn and H.G. Wells: The Photographer and the Novelist: A Unique Collection of Photographs and Letters from the University Library's H.G. Wells Collection* (Urbana: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1997).

example, Coburn was a fellow of the Theosophical Society in England and Wales.⁸⁷ In Aperture's monograph on Coburn,⁸⁸ Weaver discusses the mystical aspect of Coburn's life in great detail, explaining that in 1923 Coburn's relentless experimentation with comparative religion and the occult slowed when he joined the Universal Order, "which dedicated itself to the study of sacred texts referred to collectively as *The Shrine of Wisdom*."⁸⁹ One year later, in Coburn's 1924 article "Photography and the Quest of Beauty,"⁹⁰ he had developed a definitively mystical vocabulary, distinguishing between "earthly things" and those that "transcend them" – between reality and spirituality.⁹¹ By the 1950s, Coburn was an active Freemason, being referred to, for example, as Inspector General of North Wales in a letter dated March 15, 1954.⁹² Clearly, Coburn was deeply interested and invested in pursuing a spiritual path, much like Maeterlinck.

Although there is no irrefutable evidence from the writing and work created by Coburn prior to his illustration of *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, the likelihood that Coburn was, in fact, interested in mysticism from the onset of his photographic career does exist, and can be seen in three areas of his photographic activities: first through the vocabulary used by Coburn in his writings, secondly in what is conveyed through

⁸⁷ Certificate of Membership to the Theosophical Society in England and Wales for Alvin Langdon Coburn and his wife Edith W. Coburn, dated January 17, 1919. Papers and Ephemera of Alvin Langdon Coburn, Box 15.

⁸⁸ Weaver, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Symbolist Photographer*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 51.

⁹⁰ Coburn, "Photography and the Quest of Beauty," *The Photographic Journal* 65, no. 48 (1924): 159-167.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 160.

⁹² Papers and Ephemera of Alvin Langdon Coburn, Box 15.

Coburn's photography, and finally through Coburn's collaboration with the author Henry James.

In 1902, only three years after the trip with his cousin F. Holland Day to England that began his professional career as a photographer,⁹³ Coburn wrote a series of four articles in which he described and published photographs of Christian missions in California. Telling in Coburn's choice of subject matter alone, these articles also reveal the spiritual vocabulary used by Coburn to describe the missions. Explaining that "the soul of the artist photographer will recognize a kindred spirit in these ruins"⁹⁴ while describing the mission of San Juan Capistrano, Coburn goes on to explain in an article about the San Gabriel mission that to him "there is always a certain air of mystery and hidden wisdom about an ancient building of any sort, especially so in one used for the purpose of worship."⁹⁵ Without addressing his personal mysticism directly, Coburn shows his propensity for spirituality through his choice of words.

The following year, the photography critic Thomas Harrison Cummings wrote the article "Some Photographs by Alvin Langdon Coburn,"⁹⁶ attributing to Coburn the ability of conveying emotion and feeling through his photography, in particular his portraits. In 1906, playwright and amateur photographer George Bernard Shaw (1856 – 1950) similarly praised Coburn's portraits for their ability to express something more of the

⁹³ Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 14.

⁹⁴ Coburn, "The California Missions: San Juan Capistrano," *Photo Era* 9, no. 6 (1902): 255.

⁹⁵ Coburn, "The California Missions: San Gabriel," *Photo Era* 9, no. 5 (1902): 206.

⁹⁶ Thomas Harrison Cummings, "Some Photographs by Alvin Langdon Coburn," *Photo Era* 10, no. 3 (1903): 87-92.

individual than a mere likeness, something of the person's nature.⁹⁷ Shaw went on to explain Coburn's impulse to "convey a mood and not to impart local information, or to supply pretty views and striking sunsets."⁹⁸ Further still, in a 1907 review of Coburn's work, Sidney Allan⁹⁹ explained that "I did not merely see the faces of three distinct personalities, but something beyond; something of their life, their occupation."¹⁰⁰ This sentiment was repeated in many reviews of Coburn's work. In 1914, Coburn published an article¹⁰¹ in which he agreed with the statement made by his friend Shaw in 1906. In this article, Coburn is beginning to differentiate between the earthbound nature of the mechanical photographic process and the otherworldly character of the moods and emotions he wishes to portray through photography.¹⁰² By agreeing with Shaw's statement of Coburn's intention to "convey a mood" rather than "local information," Coburn was emphasizing the importance of conveying spirituality over material reality in his work by 1906. With the additional analysis of Coburn's mission articles, this interest can be traced back as early as 1902.

⁹⁷ *Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Work of Alvin Langdon Coburn*, with a preface by George Bernard Shaw (Liverpool: The Liverpool Amateur Photographic Association, 1906), 3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

⁹⁹ Sidney Allan was one of several pseudonyms (including Sadakichi Hartmann, Innocent De La Salle and A. Chameleon) used by the photography and art critic Carl Hartmann (1867 – 1944). Hartmann was a "popular lecturer on art" by 1895, and was frequently published in art magazines, including Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work*. For more information on Hartmann, see Dictionary of Art Historians, "Carl Hartmann," In Association with the Department of Art, Art History and Visual Studies, Duke University, <http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/hartmanns.htm> (accessed August 13, 2011).

¹⁰⁰ Sidney Allan, "Alvin Langdon Coburn – Secession Portraiture," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*, no. 44 (1907): 252.

¹⁰¹ Coburn, "Alvin Langdon Coburn Artist-Photographer," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine* 51, no. 1 (1914): 762.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 757.

The final evidence of Coburn's early interest in mysticism can be observed in his collaboration with Henry James. Coburn met the author in 1905 to take his portrait for *The Century* magazine.¹⁰³ Between 1906 and 1907, Coburn began gathering images for the frontispieces of James's twenty-four novels and short stories.¹⁰⁴ Called 'the New York Edition,' the project was a collection of James's complete works, with a carefully composed preface by James and a frontispiece provided for each volume by Coburn.¹⁰⁵ Although James was known to generally dislike the illustration of literature due to the innate competition of the picture and word,¹⁰⁶ he saw in Coburn's work the ability of photography to represent something other than literal reality. Like Coburn, James believed that "the unsayable is the better half of all that belongs to a work of art."¹⁰⁷ With this mutual conviction, James and Coburn began, as James later explained, the

hunt for a series of reproducible subjects – such moreover as might best consort with photography – the reference of which to Novel or Tale should exactly be *not* competitive and obvious, should on the contrary plead its case with some shyness, that of images always confessing themselves mere optical symbols or echoes, expressions of no particular thing in the text, but only the type or idea of this or that thing.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Weaver, *Alvin Langdon Coburn: Symbolist Photographer*, 79.

¹⁰⁴ Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 52.

¹⁰⁵ James's *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* was published in twenty-three volumes between 1907 and 1909 by Macmillan & Co. in London and Charles Scribner & Sons in New York. For more information, see Ralph Franklin Bogardus, *Pictures and Texts: Henry James, A.L. Coburn, and New Ways of Seeing in Literary Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984).

¹⁰⁶ Bogardus, 73.

¹⁰⁷ Henry James, *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts*, ed. John Sweeney (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 118.

¹⁰⁸ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1909), xi.

Working from extensive notes written by James detailing exactly what to photograph for the ideal frontispiece and where that subject could be found,¹⁰⁹ Coburn was ultimately being taught how to create symbolist photography by someone who fully understood the concept. On his trip to Paris in October 1906, for example, Coburn was asked to search for a *porte cochère* (or carriage entrance) that was to “symbolize the barrier between Madame de Cintré and Christopher Newman” in James’s *The American*,¹¹⁰ a request that came to fruition in Coburn’s *The Faubourg St. Germain* (figure 19). “Always an experimenter and always concerned with psychological aspects such as evolving consciousness and the subtleties of social relationships, James developed into a kind of symbolist,”¹¹¹ passing his wealth of knowledge and way of seeing on to Coburn through their collaboration.

While James was often termed a literary symbolist by his contemporaries, Coburn was correspondingly developing into a photographic symbolist, using imagery to represent something other than the visible reality that it reflected. Stemming from the same desire to use what photographic historian and University of Kansas Professor John Pultz describes as “nonrational and intuitive perception to explore the elusive realm of hidden meaning and rare beauty behind sensory appearances,”¹¹² the use of symbolism in photography reached its peak at the turn of the century through the artistic photography movement known as pictorialism. Poet, biographer and critic Edward

¹⁰⁹ Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 52.

¹¹⁰ Bogardus, 13.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 144.

¹¹² John Pultz, “Equivalence, Symbolism, and Minor White’s Way into the Language of Photography,” *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 39, no. 1 / 2 (1980): 28.

Lucie-Smith defines the symbol as “something which exist[s] in its own right, diffusing a mysterious influence around itself, and affecting the whole context in which it [is] placed.”¹¹³ Due to these characteristics, the symbol was a device favored by pictorialist photographers reacting against scientific naturalism and realism by deliberately blurring or manipulating their photographs.¹¹⁴ In this way, pictorialists used symbolism to escape photography’s “inherently realistic”¹¹⁵ and materialistic nature in favor of an approach to photography that in the words of the contemporary critic Charles Caffin (1854 – 1918) “evolved into the region of the spiritual, and is concerned with the expression of what in the main is inexpressible.”¹¹⁶ This idea is further explained by Pultz,

while the symbolists rejected the tyranny of objects, they turned to nature and the landscape for language. Their intention was not to capture the sensory reality of the landscape for its own sake but to find images they could lift out and employ to suggest the ineffable.¹¹⁷

Finding expression through symbolism and spirituality, Coburn’s garden photographs, used to illustrate Maeterlinck’s *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, made use of natural elements to represent Coburn’s spiritual ideas.

As the first major illustration project tackled by the twenty-four year old Coburn from 1906 through 1907, the symbolic work created at the request of James was likely the template on which Coburn’s illustration of *The Intelligence of the Flowers* was modeled. As such, the James frontispieces represent the final instance in which

¹¹³ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1972), 16-17.

¹¹⁴ Laura Barrett, “‘Material Without Being Real’: Photography and the End of Reality in *The Great Gatsby*,” *Studies in the Novel* 30, no. 4 (1998): 543.

¹¹⁵ Pultz, 28.

¹¹⁶ Charles H. Caffin, “Symbolism and Allegory,” *Camera Work*, no. 18 (1907): 17.

¹¹⁷ Pultz, 29.

Coburn's interest in mysticism is apparent prior to his illustration of Maeterlinck's book. Not only was Coburn taking pictures of the people, places and objects that surrounded him, he was looking within himself and using the scientific medium of photography to create symbolic imagery from those objects. In doing so, Coburn's working method reflected the spiritual crisis of the nineteenth century by using photography to represent ideas beyond the natural objects themselves, therefore escaping their material character. Using such images to illustrate *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, with Maeterlinck's "fantastic themes, use of symbols to represent ideas, and emphasis on inner feelings [that] embodied the Symbolist movement"¹¹⁸ seems only fitting. Coburn's interests, however, did not lie strictly in science and mysticism; he was also fascinated by the use of flowers as a symbolic device.

6. THE HISTORY OF FLORAL SYMBOLISM

While many branches of thought and organizations developed out of the division between science and spirituality during the nineteenth century, one of those to develop under the umbrella of science was botany. Just as other organizations and belief systems could not entirely separate science from spirituality, neither could the field of botany. Although botany had been practiced for centuries as the study of plant life, it began to gain authority in the eighteenth century and popularity among laypeople throughout the nineteenth century. Botanical illustration of America's plant life quickly

¹¹⁸ Jennifer Huget and Margaret Moore, eds., *A.L. Coburn's Men of Mark: Pioneers of Modernism* (Hartford, CT: The Mark Twain House & Museum, 2004), 23.

became one of the chief methods by which botany reached and interested the general public. As discussed by Ella M. Foshay, member of the Vassar College Department of Art and organizer of the 1984 exhibition *Reflections of Nature* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, “the earliest images of American flora were produced by European artist-explorers seeking to document the newly discovered natural products of the New World.”¹¹⁹ Christopher Looby, Humanities Professor at UCLA interested in Gay, Lesbian and Queer Studies, examines the subject matter as well, explaining that the early floral images were followed by “an explosion of popular interest in flowers, the result principally of the introduction into European countries and the United States of new exotic species like orchids following expeditions by explorers and natural historians into remote tropical locales.”¹²⁰

Adding to the public interest in botany were scientific advancements that began to shine a new light on the field of study. One such development was a new method of taxonomy developed by Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus (1707 – 1778) in the eighteenth century. This method of organization became known as the ‘sexual system,’ classifying plants by their reproductive organs.¹²¹ Decades later, Charles Darwin published several essays on the subject,¹²² introducing new developments in the natural sciences and expanding on the information that was generally known about particular species of

¹¹⁹ Ella M. Foshay, *Reflections of Nature: Flowers in American Art* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1984), 95.

¹²⁰ Christopher Looby, “Flowers of Manhood: Race, Sex and Floriculture from Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Robert Mapplethorpe,” *Criticism* 37, no. 1 (1995), 6.

¹²¹ Foshay, 26-27.

¹²² See, for example, *On the Various Contrivances by Which British and Foreign Orchids Are Fertilised by Insects* (1862), *The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants* (1865), and *The Effects of Cross and Self Fertilization in the Vegetable Kingdom* (1876).

plants.¹²³ Advancements in knowledge and the promulgation of articles such as Darwin's facilitated the popularization of botany among scientists and laymen alike.

Not strictly contained within the realm of scientific study, the popularity of botany spread into general society as well through its infusion into visual art and cultural pursuits. The Rococo period in the eighteenth century had introduced floral decoration in art and architecture, while also fuelling the appeal of garden activities.¹²⁴ Flower gardens were especially popular in England, America, and France with an emphasis on *flowering* plants; gardens became a symbol of civilization, associated with literature and the arts.¹²⁵ Due to this association, it became common for individuals to undertake botanical pursuits. William Henry Fox Talbot (1800 – 1877), for example, was not only one of the discoverers of photography but also a distinguished botanist and a Fellow of London's prestigious Linnaean Society.¹²⁶ Similarly, Edward Steichen (1879 – 1973), a prominent pictorialist, was a passionate horticulturalist, developing new varieties of oriental poppies, a pure blue petunia, and a perennial delphinium.¹²⁷ This group also included Maeterlinck, who nurtured a lifelong devotion to flowers and

¹²³ Foshay, 56.

¹²⁴ Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-De-Siècle Art* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 27.

¹²⁵ Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 7.

¹²⁶ William A. Ewing, *Flora Photographica, Masterpieces of Flower Photography: 1835 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 19.

gardening¹²⁸ that would eventually become immortalized in his numerous essays on the subject, most notably *The Intelligence of the Flowers*.

Although the photographs used to illustrate Maeterlinck's essay seem perfectly comfortable in their function, historically, photography was not employed for botanical illustration. Throughout the nineteenth century, many spiritual individuals believed that art's purpose was to illuminate universal truths of the world that were part of a divine plan through the accurate and specific depiction of nature.¹²⁹ Similarly, early notions of photography held that the medium was able to reveal unbiased truth, capturing only what was there to be captured.¹³⁰ Although this latter notion appears to couple photography and botanical illustration quite well, by the 1890s, photography was still not commonly used for the illustration of botanical texts and essays.¹³¹ Prominent English biology instructor Edward Aveling (1849 – 1898), for example, wrote a plea to authors of botanical books in 1892, urging them to use photography's ability to accurately represent plant life to their advantage.¹³² The primary technical feature hindering botanical illustrators from embracing the use of photography in the 1890s was the medium's inability to reproduce color.¹³³ In fact, the first significant depiction of flowers in photography was a body of work produced by Adolphe Braun (1812 – 1877) in

¹²⁸ Moses, 34.

¹²⁹ Foshay, 35.

¹³⁰ Francis Frith, "The Art of Photography," *The Art Journal* 5 (1859): 71.

¹³¹ Ewing, 14.

¹³² Edward Aveling, "Botany and Photography," *The Photographic News* 36, no. 1751 (1892): 197.

¹³³ James Mew, "Photographic Botany," *The Photographic News* 36, no. 1755 (1892): 259.

the early 1850s.¹³⁴ A fabric designer, Braun made albumen prints as reference materials for consumers (see figure 20).

Later in the century, due to their aptitude for symbolism and allegory,¹³⁵ as well as their popularity in nineteenth century society, flowers became common in pictorial photography. Responding to the debate between science and spirituality raging at the end of the nineteenth century,¹³⁶ pictorialists endeavored to re-position photography as a legitimate fine art, focusing on composition and aesthetics.¹³⁷ According to Beverly Seaton, Assistant Professor of English at the Ohio State University at Newark, literary floral symbolism in the nineteenth century stemmed from a “biological base” in which “flowers [were] seen to represent persons in their relations to nature, in their sexual roles, [and] in the place of mankind in the cosmos.”¹³⁸ This type of floral symbolism, however, was not limited to the written word. Among other pictorialists, Coburn used photography to this end in order to express his feelings and emotions about societal life, typical of the nineteenth century’s personification of flowers.¹³⁹

Evidenced through his constant experimentation with photographic processes and comparative religions, Coburn was an inquisitive individual by nature who subscribed to both modern and antimodern points of view. In contrast to his antimodern interest in spirituality, for example, his fascination with floral symbolism

¹³⁴ Ewing, 11.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 16.

¹³⁸ Seaton, “Towards a Historical Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification,” *Poetics Today* 10, no. 4 (1989): 681.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 683.

was utterly modern. As discussed by Lears in *No Place of Grace*, symbolism became extremely common during the late nineteenth century, reinforcing modern “feelings of diffuseness and disorientation.”¹⁴⁰ However, the popularity of symbolism eventually led to “the devaluation of symbols,” reducing “them to commodities in the marketplace of taste” and strengthening the feeling “that the urban environment was somehow artificial and unreal.”¹⁴¹ Similarly, several months prior to the publication of *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, a columnist described Maeterlinck’s nature essays as making “a deliberate concession to popular taste.”¹⁴² While the spiritual component of Maeterlinck’s writing clearly leans towards antimodern beliefs, the existence of his publications as forms of modern commodities cannot be denied. Likewise, Coburn’s desire to escape materialism is certainly an antimodern tenet, however his interest in the quality of fine art reproductions and deluxe publications can also be considered a modern strategy.

Throughout the nineteenth century, botanical symbolism increased in popularity among both professionals and laymen, becoming particularly related to romance and sexuality. This phenomenon was strongest in Victorian England; the ‘language of flowers’ was a veritable craze in which flowers and floral language were used to express ideas and feelings relating to courtship, relationships, romance, and marriage.¹⁴³ As explained by Seaton, “in the flower personification of the nineteenth century we see that the culture is trying to bring man back into the realm of sentient nature, to fit

¹⁴⁰ Lears, 33.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² A.D., “Inspired Journalism,” *The Academy* 72, no. 1819 (1907): 271.

¹⁴³ Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History*, 66.

mankind into the cosmos by showing how nature represents human emotions and situations.”¹⁴⁴ By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the language of flowers had evolved and become far more allusive in its symbolism. With Linnaeus’s system, a new vocabulary for describing and illustrating flora had developed, and it focused on the gender and reproductive organs of flowers. Combined with the origin of many botanical terms¹⁴⁵ and Darwin’s focus on pollination and fertilization in his botanical writing, a highly sexualized use of the language was developed.

In a recent publication, Alison Syme, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto, discusses the use of floral symbolism as a device to further “the naturalization of alternative sexualities and identities”¹⁴⁶ during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In her book, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art*, Syme discusses the countless references to non-reproductive sexuality veiled with botanical tropes in popular literature, art, and culture.¹⁴⁷ Many vegetable or flower codes, and even code words were developed and used by, or in relation to, the homosexual community such as “‘pansies,’ ‘buttercups,’ ‘daisies,’

¹⁴⁴ Seaton, “Towards a Historical Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification,” 697.

¹⁴⁵ “The names of flowers, such as orchid, from the Greek *orkhis* (testicle), or vanilla, from the Latin *vagina*, demonstrate the antiquity of these associations.” Syme, 26.

¹⁴⁶ Syme, 13.

¹⁴⁷ One such example discussed by Syme is Henry James, “for whom the artist was often a flower, described his creative process as beginning with a ‘single small seed,’ ‘minute and wind-blown,’ which provided the ‘germ of a story.’” Syme, 7. It is interesting to note that James and Coburn had become close friends since their meeting in 1905.

'violets,' 'blossoms,' and even more generally, 'horticultural lads.'"¹⁴⁸ These signals were also apparent in flowers worn by men in their buttonholes or eyelets, as they were often taken for a "symbol of and precursor to sexual activity" as well as a "sign of questionable masculinity."¹⁴⁹ Developed as a means of communicating with one another secretly, George Chauncey, Assistant Professor of U.S. History at the University of Chicago, explains that these codes were necessary due to the "battery of laws [that] criminalized not only gay men's narrowly 'sexual' behavior, but also their association with one another, their cultural styles, and their efforts to organize and speak on their own behalf."¹⁵⁰ With this history in mind, and the proliferation of flowers and floral symbolism throughout the sciences, arts, and daily society, it comes as no surprise that Maeterlinck's nature studies would be well received, nor that the young Coburn would be attracted to such work.

7. COBURN'S INTEREST IN FLORAL SYMBOLISM

There are a number of associations that exist between Coburn and the use of floral symbolism by the homosexual community of the early twentieth century, most noticeably in the friends that he kept, and the men and mentors that were important to him. In 1904, for example, Coburn photographed the mystic, writer, and literary critic

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 46.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 50.

¹⁵⁰ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 2.

Andrew Lang (1844 – 1912) for his *Men of Mark* series¹⁵¹ with a carnation in his buttonhole (see figure 21), one of the flowers with which Oscar Wilde identified himself.¹⁵² Explaining his practice of saturating his mind with the works of the individual prior to taking his or her portrait,¹⁵³ Coburn was sure to know aspects of his sitter quite well. It therefore seems plausible that such a seemingly fashionable choice as Lang's wearing a flower in his buttonhole would have been addressed and understood upon meeting.

The photographic magazine *Camera Work* was likewise an important tool for disseminating themes and trends in pictorial photographic culture, and the trend of floral symbolism was no exception. Edited and produced by Alfred Stieglitz between 1903 and 1917, *Camera Work* was a publication with which Coburn was familiar from at least April of 1904 when his photographs were first printed in its pages,¹⁵⁴ though he was likely aware of the publication upon opening his studio in New York in 1902.¹⁵⁵ In his autobiography, Coburn stated that, in his opinion, *Camera Work* was “the most beautiful photographic magazine ever produced.”¹⁵⁶ The publication is replete with references to both Maeterlinck, as well as the type of floral symbolism discussed by

¹⁵¹ Coburn, *Men of Mark* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1913). This publication is made up of a series of portraits taken by Coburn between 1904 and 1913. The portraits included are of artists and authors admired by Coburn, as stated in his article “Photographic Adventures,” *The Photographic Journal* 102, no. 5 (1962): 150-158.

¹⁵² Syme, 4.

¹⁵³ Coburn, “Photographic Adventures,” 153.

¹⁵⁴ Coburn's photography appeared in three issues of *Camera Work*: No. 6, April 1904, No. 15, July 1906 and No. 21, January 1908. Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 20.

¹⁵⁵ Weaver, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Symbolist Photographer*, 79.

¹⁵⁶ Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 20.

Syme. For example, Coburn likely would have read the piece entitled *White Chrysanthemums* by Sadakichi Hartmann¹⁵⁷ published in the January 1904 issue of *Camera Work*. In it, the author states:

I am also fond of displaying it [a white chrysanthemum] in my buttonhole; not for effect, however, but simply because I want other people to know who I am; for those human beings, who are sensitive to the charms of the chrysanthemum, must hail from the same country in which my soul abides, and I should like to meet them.¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, a poem entitled *Dawn-Flowers* was published in the April 1903 issue of *Camera Work*.¹⁵⁹ This issue was also prefaced with a letter from Maeterlinck welcoming photography to the world of art. Taking its title from Edward Steichen's print by the same name, the poem was dedicated to Maeterlinck by its author 'S.H.,' forming a relationship between Maeterlinck, Coburn's circle of friends and colleagues, and floral symbolism.

In addition to Syme's scholarship on the subject, Looby discusses the "the way in which sexuality was present in floricultural discourse (but in a deniable way, as it were)" in many popular pieces of literature,¹⁶⁰ adding further evidence to its pervasiveness in popular culture. Henry James (another of Coburn's 'men of mark'), who was known to

¹⁵⁷ Pseudonym used by Carl Hartmann. See note 99 for more details.

¹⁵⁸ Sadakichi Hartmann, "White Chrysanthemums," *Camera Work*, no. 5 (1904): 19.

¹⁵⁹ S.H., "Dawn Flowers," *Camera Work*, no. 2 (1903): 29. This poem was attributed to Sadakichi Hartmann in Sadakichi Hartmann, *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre: Selected Critical Essays on Photography and Profiles of Photographic Pioneers*, ed. Harry W. Lawton and George Knox with the collaboration of Wistaria Hartmann Linton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 351.

¹⁶⁰ Looby, 11.

have had relationships with younger men,¹⁶¹ made frequent use of botanical character names, and went so far as to compare the act of storytelling to pollination in the preface to his 1908 “New York Edition” of the novel *The Spoils of Poynton*,¹⁶² illustrated with a frontispiece by Coburn. James and Coburn were good friends, entering into the aforementioned collaboration that would become the basis for Coburn’s approach to the illustration of literature. It is therefore entirely possible that Coburn was aware of James’s particular use of floral symbolism.

Finally, F. Holland Day’s significant influence over Coburn and his photographic career reinforces the likelihood that Coburn was aware of, and possibly sympathetic to, the homosexual community’s use of floral symbolism. Although most sources imply that Coburn’s relationship with Day began and concluded with their trip to London in 1899, a comprehensive analysis of Coburn’s early career suggests that Day had an intrinsic and lasting role in Coburn’s development as a photographer. Though interested in photography since his eighth birthday,¹⁶³ Coburn’s career as a professional photographer began at the age of eighteen on his European journey with Day who was, in 1899, eighteen years Coburn’s senior. As one of the first photography mentors in

¹⁶¹ Susan E. Gunter and Steven H. Jobe, *Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James’s Letters to Younger Men* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁶² Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James: New York Edition*, vol. 10, *The Spoils of Poynton, A London Life, The Chaperon* (New York: Scribner, 1908). Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* quoted in Syme, 7.

¹⁶³ “This began on my eighth birthday, when two of my Californian uncles gave me a 4” x 5” Kodak, which had to be loaded in a dark room with a roll of film for forty-eight exposures.” Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 12.

Coburn's life,¹⁶⁴ it is likely that Day's influence and eminence as a photographer stayed with Coburn, leading to his emulation of Day's approach to life and photography. This speculation is strengthened by the countless similarities between Day and Coburn's professional lives.

Throughout their careers, Coburn and Day showed a strong predilection for the book as a means to present and disseminate their photography and opinions. Illustrating seventeen books by the end of his career,¹⁶⁵ a passion for the illustration and publication of beautifully designed and produced books was deeply rooted in Coburn, possibly influenced by his older cousin, Day. While Coburn was known to publish his photography in books, Day founded and ran a publishing company in Boston with Herbert Copeland¹⁶⁶ from 1893 until 1899.¹⁶⁷ Among the company's publications was Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley.¹⁶⁸ Day was a fervent admirer of

¹⁶⁴ Although Day was an experienced photographer and mentor to Coburn, there were skills that the young Coburn taught Day as well. Coburn states: "Up to this time Day had all his developing and printing done by others, but now under my guidance he learned to do it himself. In this I became the teacher and he the pupil." *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 14.

¹⁶⁵ Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn Photographer: An Autobiography*, 143.

¹⁶⁶ Copeland graduated from Harvard University in 1891, taking an editorial position with the *Youth's Companion*, "a popular periodical aimed at juvenile readers," before partnering with Day in their publishing firm of Copeland and Day. Patricia J. Fanning, *Through an Uncommon Lens: The Life and Photography of F. Holland Day* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 42.

¹⁶⁷ Verna Posever Curtis and Jane Van Nimmen, eds., *F. Holland Day: Selected Texts and Bibliography* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1995), 7.

¹⁶⁸ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, illust. Aubrey Beardsley (Boston: Copeland and Day, London: The Bodley Head, 1894).

Wilde's,¹⁶⁹ who was known to wear a green carnation in his buttonhole.¹⁷⁰ No stranger to floral symbolism, the motto for Copeland & Day stated "as a lily among thorns" and accompanied their publisher's mark of two lilies growing out of one stalk, wreathed by a rose garland.¹⁷¹ Whether or not Day's use of floral symbolism was linked to homosexuality is still being debated, as "Day never documented his homosexual activities" leading to an "absence of firm evidence," however certain letters and events suggest that Day was likely homosexual.¹⁷² Although this statement certainly cannot be made for Coburn, through his friendships with James and Day, Coburn was likely familiar with the homosexual community of the early twentieth century, fostering in him an appreciation for the art and expression of that community, including its use of floral symbolism.

Expanding on the comparison between the two photographers, Day was a master portraitist, and focused frequently on the same celebrities that Coburn photographed several years later, gaining Coburn critical acclaim. Moreover, many famous figures photographed by Day became the men admired by Coburn in his *Men of Mark* series, such as mystic and gay rights activist Edward Carpenter (1844 – 1929), as well as Maeterlinck, whom Day had photographed in 1901.¹⁷³ As noted by Verna Posever Curtis and Jane Van Nimmen, editors of *F. Holland Day: Selected Texts and*

¹⁶⁹ Estelle Jussim, *Slave to Beauty: The Eccentric Life and Controversial Career of F. Holland Day, Photographer, Publisher, Aesthete* (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1981), 76.

¹⁷⁰ Syme, 4.

¹⁷¹ Curtis, 7.

¹⁷² Jussim, 180.

¹⁷³ Curtis, 18.

Bibliography, “in 1899, critic Sadakichi Hartmann had already advanced Day’s hegemony in the field as ‘the most ambitious and most accomplished of our American portrait photographers.’”¹⁷⁴ The following year, Hartmann praised Day’s portraits for being “intensely alike [sic] with the inner life.”¹⁷⁵ By 1907, the same critic believed Coburn’s portraits to be likewise imbued with feeling.

Similarities between the two photographers abound, reinforcing the likelihood of Day’s considerable influence over Coburn’s career, as well as his interest in Maeterlinck. For example, Day was, according to Coburn, “keen on the writings of [...] Maeterlinck and Edward Carpenter,”¹⁷⁶ made clear through Day’s avid reading and photographs of the two men. Coburn later stated, in the preface to *More Men of Mark*, that he had been an admirer of Maeterlinck’s for sixteen years prior to photographing him.¹⁷⁷ Having taken Maeterlinck’s portrait in 1915, Coburn would have been introduced to the author’s writing in 1899, the same year Coburn traveled to London with Day.¹⁷⁸ Although it was likely Day who originally introduced Coburn to Maeterlinck’s writing and mystical philosophies, the author was admired by many other

¹⁷⁴ Curtis, 18, quoted from Sadakichi Hartmann, “Portrait Painting and Portrait Photography,” *Camera Notes* 3, no. 1 (1899): 3-21.

¹⁷⁵ Sadakichi Hartmann, “A Decorative Photographer, F.H. Day,” *Photographic Times* 32 (1900): 102-108.

¹⁷⁶ Coburn, “Photographic Adventures,” 150.

¹⁷⁷ Coburn, *More Men of Mark*, 17.

¹⁷⁸ In his autobiography, Coburn describes his first meeting with Day in 1898, explaining that the latter was “an enthusiast for the writings of Keats, Maeterlinck and Edward Carpenter.” It is therefore possible that Coburn was introduced to Maeterlinck’s writing as early as 1898. Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 14.

figures in Coburn's circle, including Stieglitz and Steichen.¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, Day's work was hung in an exhibition arranged by Baron A. de Meyer and Coburn at the Galleries of the New English Art Club in London,¹⁸⁰ suggesting that the two men were still in contact as late as 1907. As noted by art historian and biographer Barbara L. Michaels, Day stayed in touch with many photographers, keeping "friends for decades."¹⁸¹

Abounding in popular culture and commonly used by some of his closest friends, Coburn was surely aware of the various functions of floral symbolism during the early twentieth century, providing a model from which to produce his own illustrations for Maeterlinck's essay. Showing the various points of view from which floral symbolism can be discussed, Syme aptly describes the symbolism's adoption by the homosexual community as a function of modernity, while Seaton's account of the nineteenth century's personification of the flower with human emotions and experiences in order to find a place for mankind within the universe describes a more Victorian, antimodern approach to floral symbolism. Combining these two approaches and applying the resulting function of floral symbolism to Coburn's illustration of *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, several possible conclusions arise. As will be discussed in the next section, Coburn used the flowers in Maeterlinck's book in order to express his emotions regarding the state of materialism in society. By expressing his experience of society

¹⁷⁹ Huget and Moore, 10.

¹⁸⁰ *An Exhibition of Modern Photography at the Galleries of the New English Art Club* (London: New English Art Club, 1907).

¹⁸¹ Barbara L. Michaels, "Portraits of Friendship: Fred Holland Day, Gertrude Käsebier and Their Circle," in *New Perspectives on F. Holland Day: Selected Presentations from the Fred Holland Day In Context Symposium held at Stonehill College, North Easton, Massachusetts April 19, 1997*, ed. Patricia J. Fanning (North Easton, Mass.: Stonehill College, 1998), 25.

through photographic floral symbolism, Coburn was able to use the science of photography to ground him within the universe through nature.

Additional conclusions may be suggested, however, if the possibility of Coburn's sympathy toward the homosexual community is taken into account while analyzing the images used to illustrate Maeterlinck's essay. In this case, Coburn's floral symbolism could be used to acknowledge and naturalize non-reproductive male sexuality without explicitly stating its existence, using the form of the flower to reposition homosexual individuals back into a society that they feel has rejected them. Supporting this argument is materialism's natural association to a conservative, steadfast attitude, while the concept of spirituality, associated with the flower, attracts ideas of freedom and lightheartedness through its notions of enlightenment. Although it cannot be stated with certainty all of the reasons why Coburn chose to embrace the use of floral symbolism, the evidence discussed in this chapter supports the argument that the photographer made use of the flower as a symbolic device in order to symbolize his attitude to life and escape materialism.

8. CONCLUSION: ANALYSIS OF PHOTOGRAVURES

This essay has explored several ways in which Coburn endeavored to escape the materialism of early twentieth century society, as revealed through his illustration of Maeterlinck's *The Intelligence of the Flowers*. The facts and subsequent theories presented in this thesis can be aptly summarized through a brief analysis of the four

photogravures used to illustrate Maeterlinck's essay, for engrained within each of them is a notion of Coburn himself, his personality, working method, and belief system.

Of primary importance in the analysis of these images is their function in relation to the book as a whole. For example, there are several indications that the photogravures do not simply illustrate what is described in the book's pages, as was normally the case with botanical illustration. Chief among these identifiers is the fact that flora depicted in the photogravures could not be printed with the colors that they reflect in reality, which is a significant tool for flower identification. Similarly, the images are not detailed enough (save for figure 11) for the average layman to be able to identify any of the flowers within them. Nor do the photogravures exhibit the flowers whose discussion accompanies the text facing them. Rather, the photogravures were likely meant as symbolic representations of Coburn's ideas and emotions, triggered by his reading of Maeterlinck's essay.

Exemplified in his work with James, who sought to use symbolic photography to represent a central conflict or theme within his novels, Coburn made use of floral imagery in *The Intelligence of the Flowers* to represent Maeterlinck's main thesis. The author's argument was not the importance of specific types of flowers, but rather the intelligence that is made visible through the actions and habits of all flowers, allowing a keen observer insight into the "genius of the earth."¹⁸² By representing this theory with photography rather than with drawings of botanical specimens, the photogravures symbolize the spiritual crisis of the mid nineteenth century resulting from the division of

¹⁸² Maeterlinck, *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, 165.

science and faith. Coburn resolves this debate for himself by allowing his photographs to reveal more than the scientific facts that they are able to capture.

The incorporation of a strong triangular component within each photograph's composition reinforces the spiritual nature of the photogravures used to illustrate Maeterlinck's essay. Due to Coburn's interest and experimentation with comparative religions such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry throughout his life¹⁸³, it is possible that he was aware of the symbolism used by such societies early in his career. As explained in *Rosicrucianism in America*, "the right angle triangle has been used from remote times to symbolize Spirit and Matter in their inclusiveness. When shown with the point downward, such an angle indicates Matter or Earth; reversed, with the point upwards, the angle signifies Spirit or the Celestial."¹⁸⁴ Through the use of downward pointing triangles in figures 11 and 12,¹⁸⁵ and upward pointing triangles in figures 13 and 14,¹⁸⁶ Coburn acknowledges the constant struggle between materialism and spirituality. Incorporating the upward pointing triangle most noticeably in figure 13, Coburn is

¹⁸³ Weaver, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Symbolist Photographer*, 23.

¹⁸⁴ J. Gordon Melton, ed. *Rosicrucianism in America* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 268.

¹⁸⁵ The three water lilies form each point of the downward pointing triangle in figure 11. The point of the garden's stone edging forms the apex of the downward pointing triangle in figure 12. Following both sides of the stone edging out of the image brings the viewer's eye to either corner of the triangle.

¹⁸⁶ The upward pointing triangle in figure 13 is formed by two statues in the image's foreground, and the large urn in the center of the image's background. The upward pointing triangle in figure 14 is slightly more subtle, formed by the sundial at the peak of the monument in the image's middleground, and the two farthest corners of its base.

perhaps echoing Charles H. Caffin's opinion that landscape work held the "vital principle of which is the recognition of soul in nature."¹⁸⁷

Equally noteworthy is the inclusion of Moor Park's unassuming sundial (figure 14), cementing the duality between materialism and spirituality. A popular garden accessory in nineteenth and twentieth century gardens,¹⁸⁸ if positioned properly, the sundial marks the passing of time through the use of light and shadow. As explained in a 1911 article on the subject, "the sun-dial is the interpreter of the garden's divinity, the sun; or perhaps the embodiment of its active principle which fosters life in the tiny seed-germ."¹⁸⁹ A simple structure to the naked eye, the sundial is complex in a number of ways, primarily in its ability to represent both opposing forces of spirituality and science. With its upward pointing triangle used to mark the passage of time through the use of the sun's light, the sundial is an obvious symbol of spirituality. Combined with its materialistic functions as a garden ornament and marker of time through darkness or shadow, however, the sundial reveals its divided nature. By photographing the sundial, Coburn is therefore able to comment on the need for both opposing forces of spirituality and science in the world in which he lived.

Imbuing flowers with human emotion was a common trend throughout the nineteenth century, coupled with the onset of the 'language of flowers' that attributed a specific meaning to every type of flower. The water lily was no exception, most often likened to purity and innocence for its white color. A suitable subject matter for the

¹⁸⁷ Charles H. Caffin, "Symbolism and Allegory," *Camera Work*, no. 18 (1907): 21.

¹⁸⁸ William A. Vollmer, "Sun-dials and How to Make Them," *House and Garden* 20, no. 1 (1911): 15.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

frontispiece of Maeterlinck's essay, the image of the water lilies opens a symbolic discourse for both subjects of mysticism and floral symbolism. As described in another of Maeterlinck's publications, the water lily "keeps itself always above the water, and has four green leaves between the air and the water; and it is rooted in the earth, and above it is opened out to the sun."¹⁹⁰ Yet another reference to Maeterlinck's previous work, the image of the water lily represents both materialism, through its downward pointing triangle and roots in the earth, as well as spirituality that is represented by the white color of the water lily and its constant exposure to the sun. Through this symbolic association, the water lilies set the tone of timelessness, characteristic of mysticism, which pervades the imagery and text of Maeterlinck's essay, especially apparent in figures 13 and 14.

Throughout his career, Coburn confirmed his devotion to spiritual matters time and again. His desire to pursue a spiritual path was recognized and acknowledged in his work as early as 1899, when he was introduced to the words of Maeterlinck. Through the expansion of his knowledge and interest in mysticism, as well as his presumed exposure to and fascination with the use of floral symbolism, Coburn was able to use the illustration of Maeterlinck's *The Intelligence of the Flowers* to reflect his desire to escape the pervasive materialism of early twentieth century society. Although the materiality of the medium of photography appears to be intrinsically at odds with this undertaking, Coburn was able to harness his spirituality and talent for symbolism in

¹⁹⁰ Ruysbroeck, quoted in Maurice Maeterlinck, *Ruysbroeck and the Mystics: With Selections from Ruysbroeck*, trans. Jane T. Stoddart (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1891), 52.

order to create an object that extended far beyond its palpable meaning. As Coburn wrote towards the end of his life, looking back on his career, “photography teaches its devotees how to look lovingly and intelligently at the world, but religious mysticism introduced the soul to God.”¹⁹¹ Coburn certainly understood the interconnectedness of science with spirituality, commenting “you may dream as much as you like before nature, but when you come to make an exposure you must think, to a certain extent, in the definite terms of science.”¹⁹² In his life, however, as with his illustrations for *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, spirituality ultimately prevailed, rising above the materiality of Coburn’s extraordinary life.

¹⁹¹ Coburn, “Photographic Adventures,” 158.

¹⁹² Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, 132.

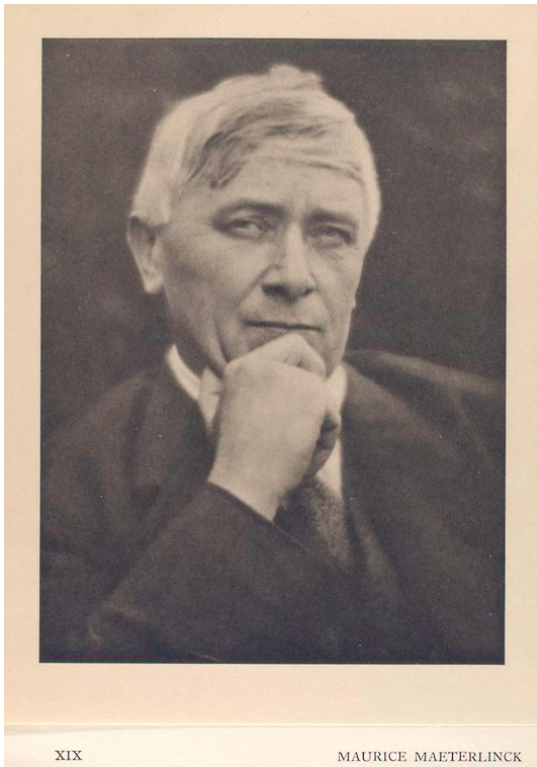
APPENDIX A: ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1



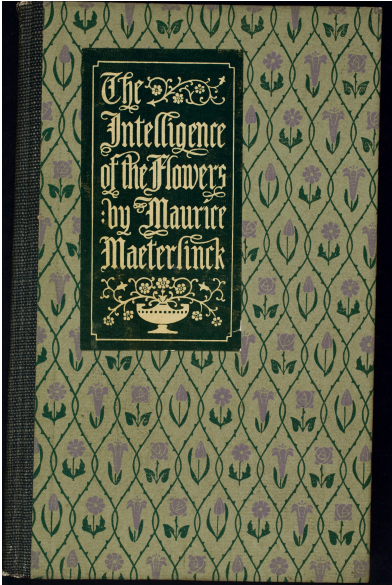
Gertrude Käsebier
[Portrait of Alvin Langdon Coburn], 1902 – 1912
Platinum print, 20.4 x 15.6 cm
GEH 1967:0099:0036
Collection of George Eastman House

Figure 2



Alvin Langdon Coburn
Maurice Maeterlinck, 1915
Photogravure print, 23 x 17 cm
From *More Men of Mark*, by Alvin Langdon Coburn
Collection of the Richard and Ronay
Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 3



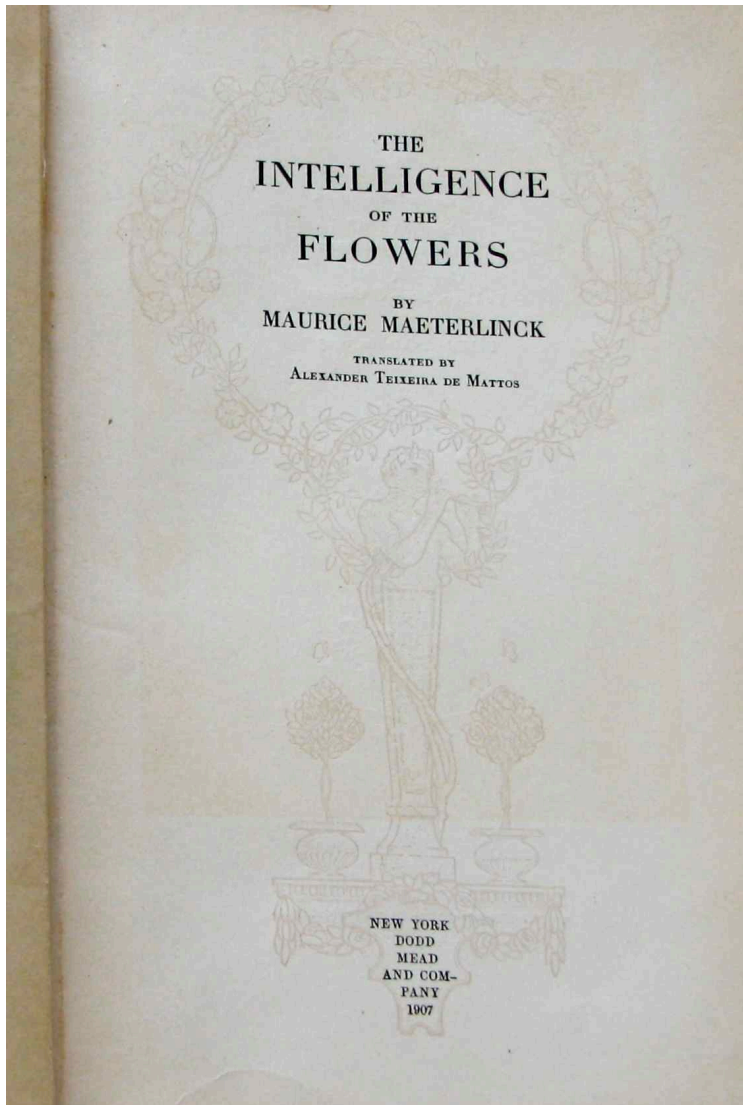
Maurice Maeterlinck, decorated by William Edgar Fisher [Cover], *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, 1907
New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 20.9 x 13 x 2.8 cm
Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library,
George Eastman House

Figure 4



William Edgar Fisher
[Paste-down endpaper and free endpaper decoration], 1907
20.4 x 12.5 cm
From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck
Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 5



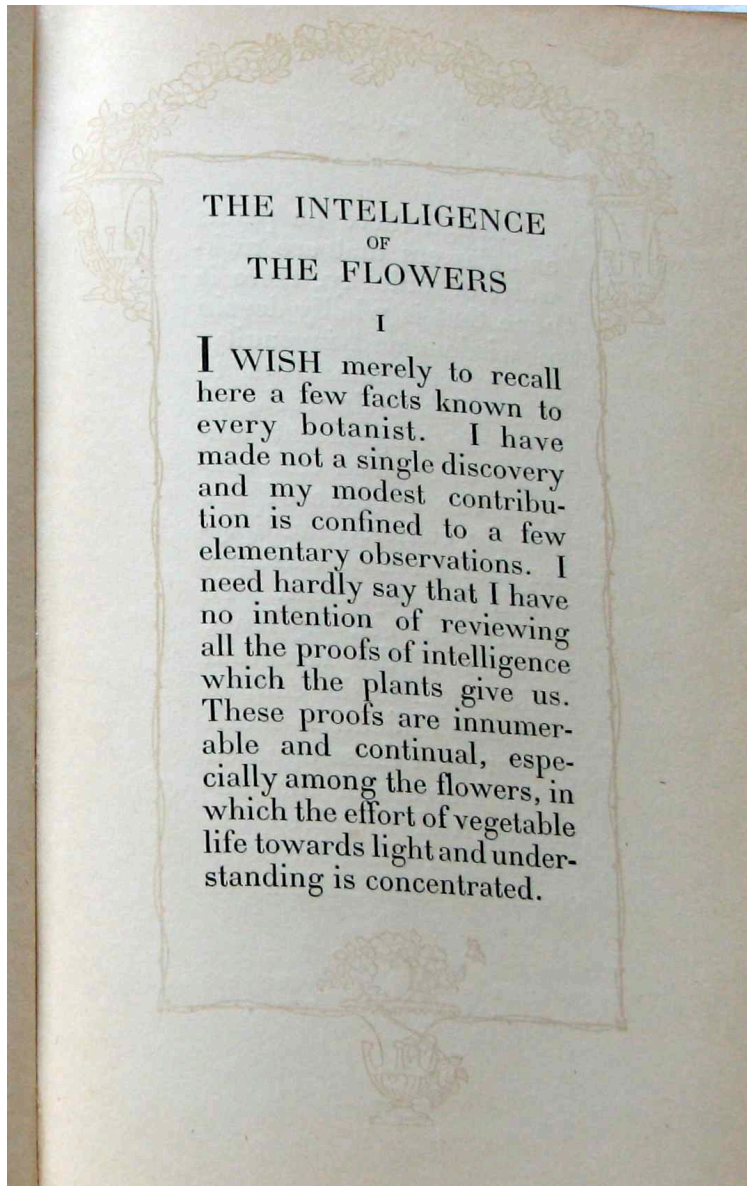
William Edgar Fisher

[Title page decoration], 1907

From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck

Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 6



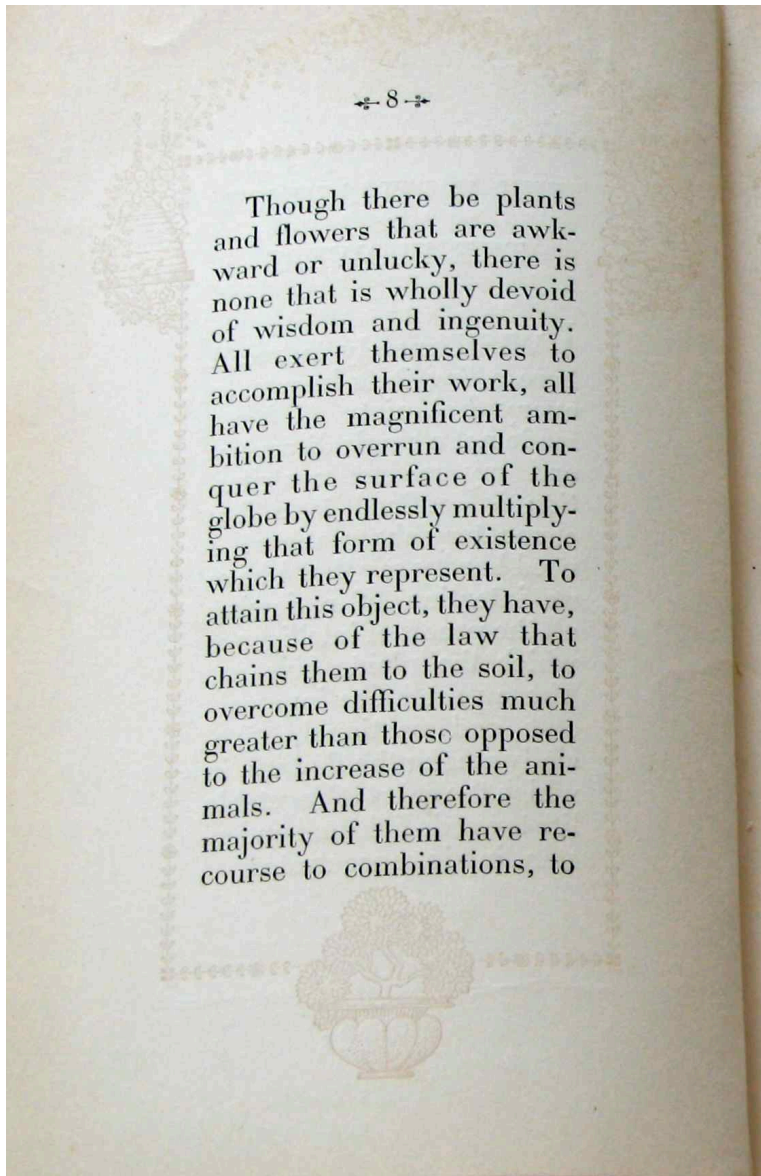
William Edgar Fisher

[Border decoration], 1907

From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck

Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 7



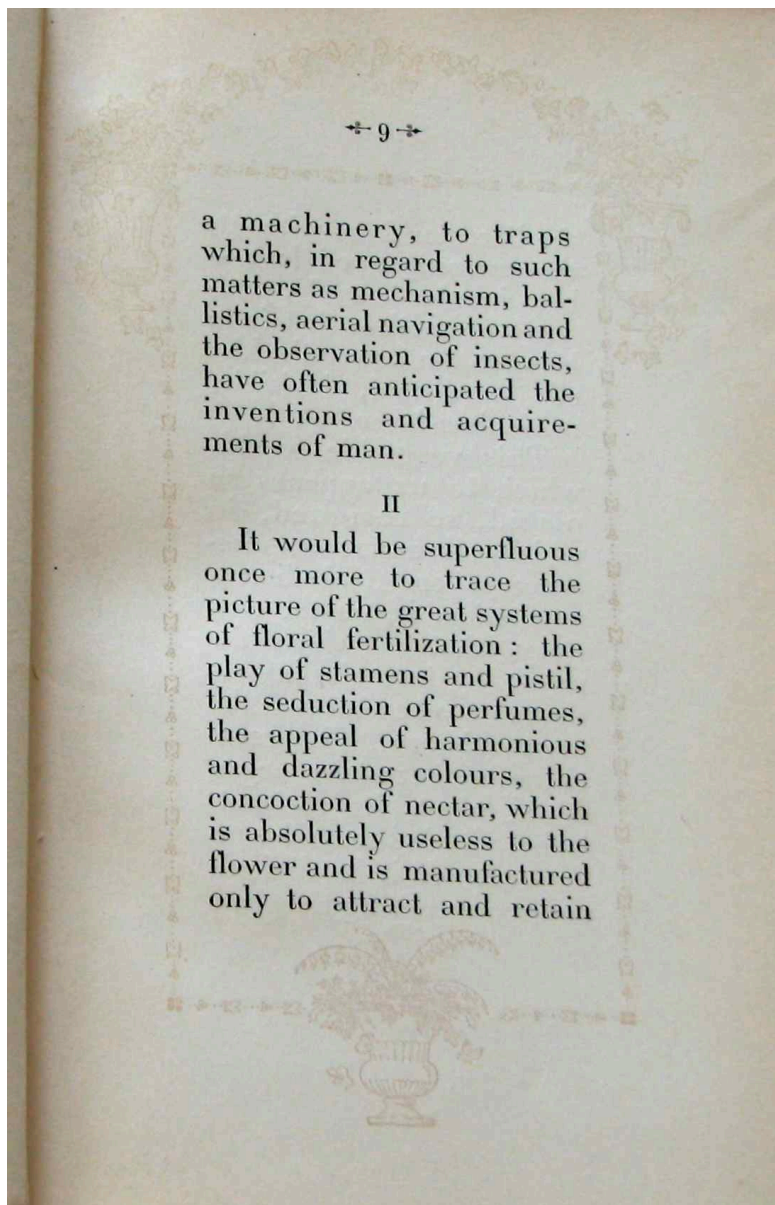
William Edgar Fisher

[Border decoration], 1907

From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck

Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 8



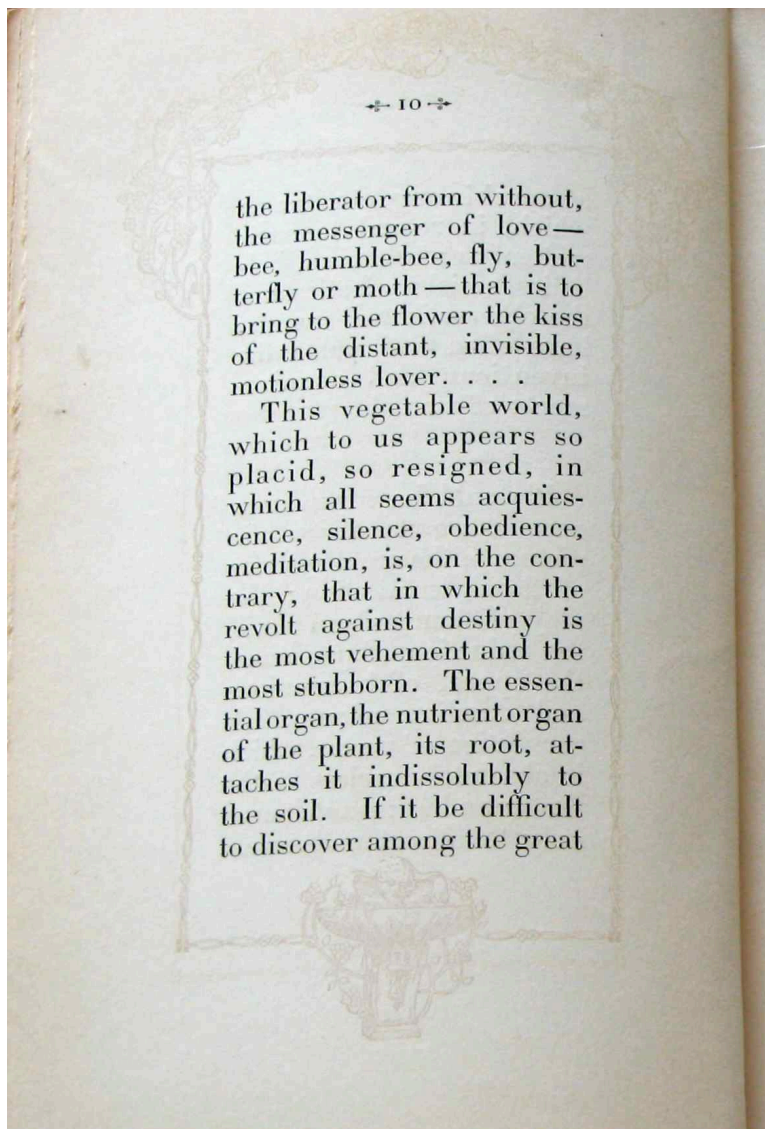
William Edgar Fisher

[Border decoration], 1907

From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck

Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 9



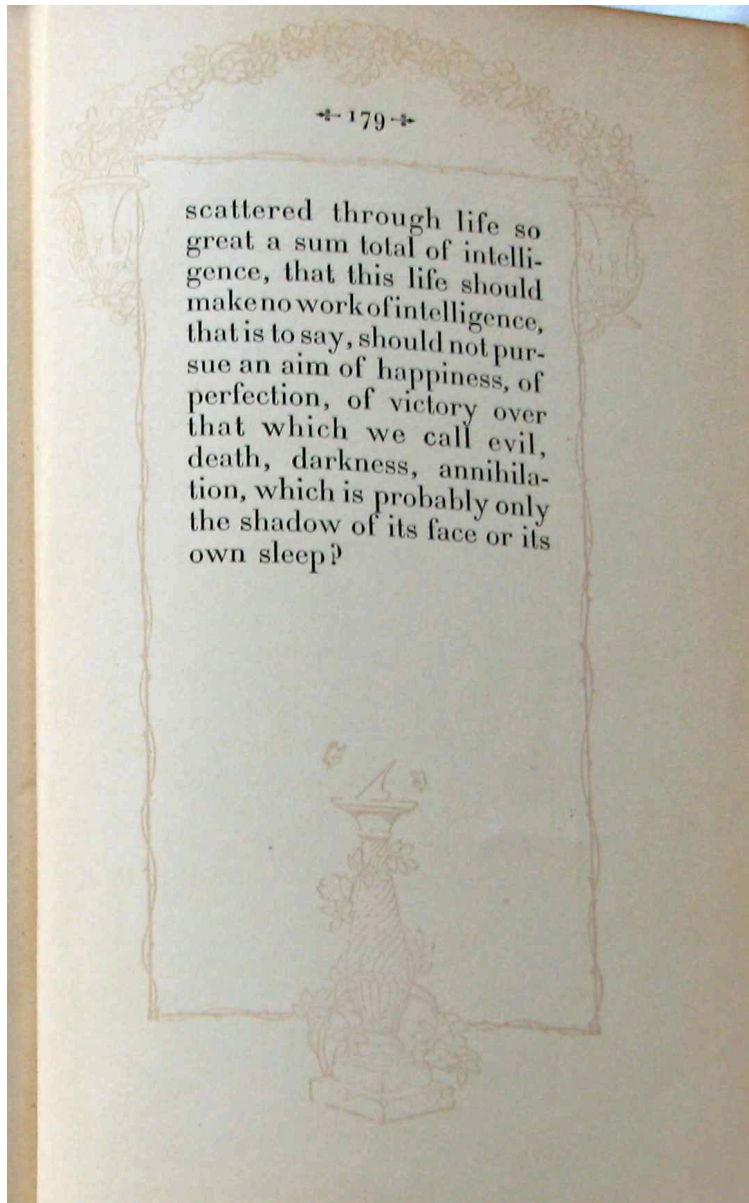
William Edgar Fisher

[Border decoration], 1907

From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck

Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 10



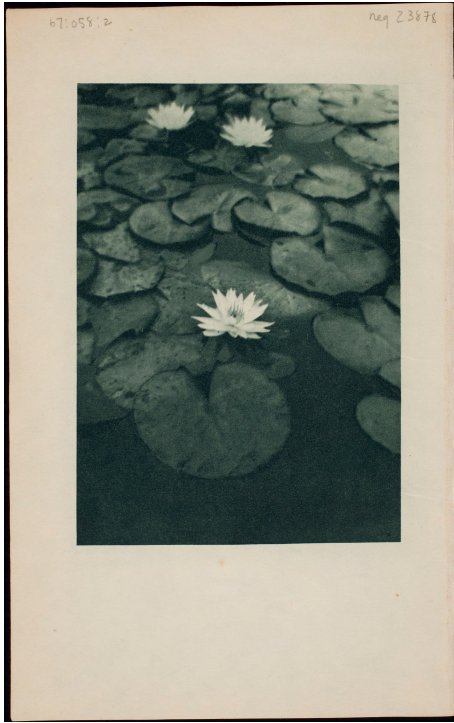
William Edgar Fisher

[Sundial decoration], 1907

From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck

Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 11



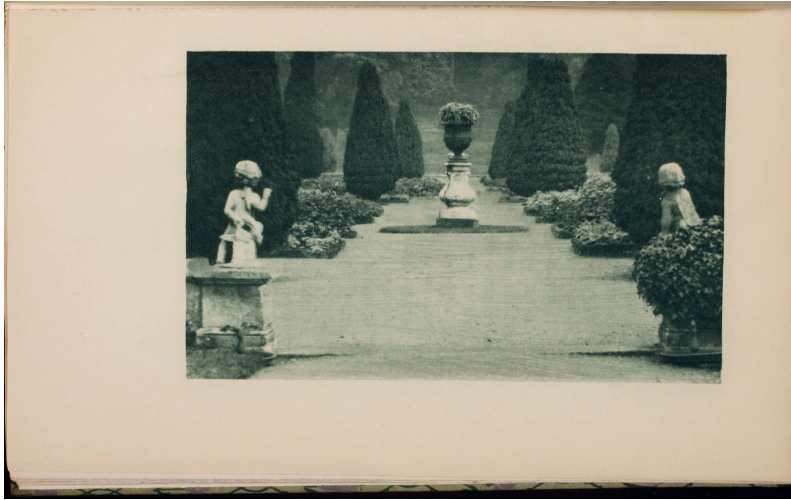
Alvin Langdon Coburn
[Water lilies], 1906 or 1907
Photogravure print, 13.5 x 9 cm
From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*,
by Maurice Maeterlinck
Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel
Library, George Eastman House

Figure 12



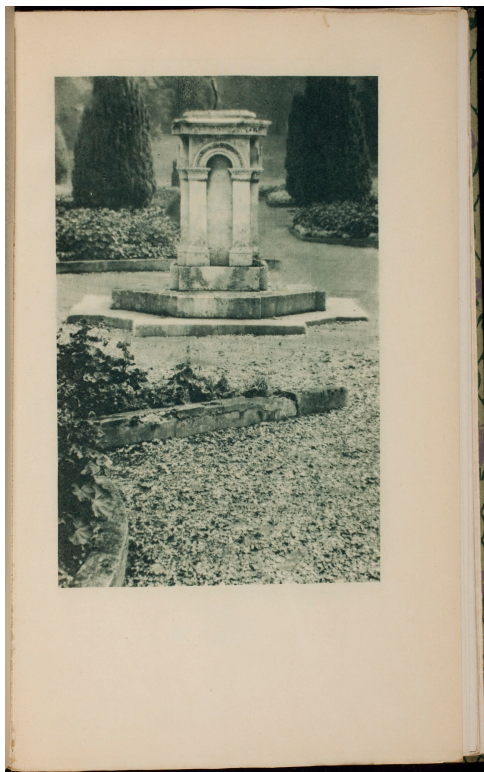
Alvin Langdon Coburn
[Cascade of flowers in urn], 1906 or 1907
Photogravure print, 13.9 x 8.5 cm
From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*,
by Maurice Maeterlinck
Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel
Library, George Eastman House

Figure 13



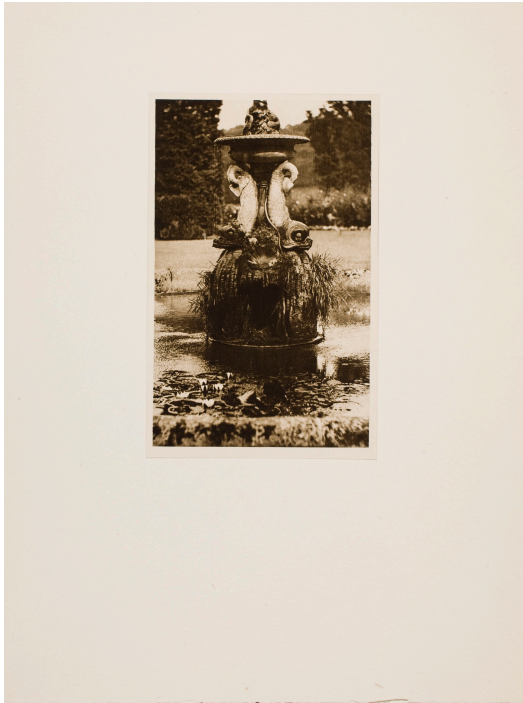
Alvin Langdon Coburn
[Garden vista], 1906 or 1907
Photogravure print, 8.5 x 13.9 cm
From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*, by Maurice Maeterlinck
Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman House

Figure 14



Alvin Langdon Coburn
[Sundial], 1906 or 1907
Photogravure print, 13.8 x 8.9 cm
From *The Intelligence of the Flowers*,
by Maurice Maeterlinck
Collection of the Richard and Ronay Menschel
Library, George Eastman House

Figure 15



Alvin Langdon Coburn
The Dolphin Fountain, ca. 1910
Photogravure print, 16.2 x 10.2 cm
GEH 1967:0150:0012
Collection of George Eastman House

Figure 16



Alvin Langdon Coburn
[Delphiniums], 1906 or 1907
Photogravure print, 13 x 9 cm
GEH 1967:0152:0008
Collection of George Eastman House

Figure 17



Alvin Langdon Coburn
[Rose], 1906 or 1907
Photogravure print, 14.1 x 9.2 cm
GEH 1967:0152:0009
Collection of George Eastman House

Figure 18



Alvin Langdon Coburn
[Tree trunk], 1906 or 1907
Photogravure print, 13.6 x 9.1 cm
GEH 1967:0152:0010
Collection of George Eastman House

Figure 19



Alvin Langdon Coburn
The Faubourg St. Germain, 1906
Gelatin silver print, 28.3 x 22.6 cm
GEH 1967:0149:0003
Collection of George Eastman House

Figure 20



Adolphe Braun
[Floral still life], 1854-57
Albumen print, 28.4 x 22.7 cm
GEH 1967:0045:0019
Collection of George Eastman House

Figure 21



Alvin Langdon Coburn
Andrew Lang, 1904
Photogravure print, 20.5 x 16.2 cm
GEH 1967:0153:0048
Collection of George Eastman House

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