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Jean Rhys and Adrian Allinson  
Roy Fuller / The Cancer Hospital: a sequence of poems



## Photography

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Robert Walker is, I think, one of the contemporary greats. No self-promoter, though. I asked him for one or two black and white prints from his transparencies for a text such as this, and they came with a demand for \$46.87. But I'm on your side! And I still have the bill. *New York Inside Out* came out in 1984 and, although William S. Burroughs introduced it, the book seems to have passed without notice. Atget had to wait a long time too, and Oxford University Press (Skyline Press) bowdlerized what might have been. Burroughs did him proud, on 'the meaning of meaninglessness, the patterns of Chaos, and the underlying unities of disparate elements'. He writes about 'intersection points between your inner reality and what you are seeing' and sounds like Stephen Palmer claiming that 'Nature is Imagination itself'. Palmer in New York – unlikely. But de Chirico, along similar lines, held that the solid base of reality in art can make us aware of 'the great mystery of the infinite, which in a moon-lit night breathes through the rents of flying clouds – Homer was a romantic'. New Yorkers may never have seen the moon, but an exceptional picture Walker gives the sky a local habitation: the Children's Zoo, Central Park, to be precise. A woman, carrying weight, leans on a fence sturdy enough to keep wild bulls at bay. She rests an ultramarine torso on a beam, stands on rickety feet and is eyed by a goose against green water. Air, water and light solidify around her shoulders, become de Chirico's solid base of reality – and the goose stare astonished.



Walker's gift is a laconic style which matches an energy in the city. The picture from the Children's Zoo puts together Miro, who was also good on heavy blues moored in vapid skies, and Ansel Adams, for some cursory rocks and logs make an island in the pond. Schnabel might do you a Creation rough-hewn in a day or two; Walker might find the sky leaning on a fence, or the sun drawn up from the road. The cover photo in his New York book is of a slab of yellow cab, drawn up, with a white hand and cigarette at one window and a ringed brown hand at the other. It means something, for the hand rhyme and the paintwork shines as the sun – but what? A great mystery of the infinite, right enough, and with an address in white on green: 629 W. 57<sup>th</sup> St, New York, NY. The final picture in the set is of the lobby at the World Trade Center, just another piece of old New York, although something might be out of joint; uprights cast even shadows on the carpet, and the sun shines on chrome or mirror trim reflecting ragged light across the even shadows – someone leans against a pillar, a failed arbitrageur of sorts – of course, Samson beginning to make an effort in the Temple. The Light shakes and Walker imagines ruin.

Compare him to Bernard Faucon with his children's tableaux. Faucon hints at great themes: Ulysses, Beulah Land, Cain and Abel. And Alex Webb in his recent *Hot Lights: Half Made Worlds* shows the place incoherent, on fire, long deserted by the family of man, taken over by his delinquent half-brothers. Walker is as handy with the sky and sun, Great Themes by any reckoning; but he dreams extravagantly, imagines the kind of fantastic city which Panurge might have roamed. But with a difference. Burroughs, introducing, notices that 'there is no urgency, no real purpose, in so many of these bodies and faces'. Imagine Panurge morose. Imagine Adam, at the Creation, virtually unrouseable and God anxious to be off. Perhaps Samson pulled the Temple down out of boredom, or distracted. Walker's New Yorkers cope; they live in a fairground, in a spectacle they never found impressive, and the braided uniforms don't fit well. In the 1930's Walker Evans represented American culture in formation, in studios, barber shops and dressing rooms. One day, Evan's pictures imply, the finished article. That day in this new New York is long gone, or was never much of a likelihood. Sure, they tried – and managed garish stage sets, some of them on a scale you might hardly believe. Painters, in a cradle, put finishing touches to ice cubes in a gargantuan ad for Gordon's Gin, '...England, American, the World'. But the weather undoes a lot, and this is a city of flaking paint and constant repair. Magic moments lie unregarded over the wall or inaccessible; redemptive lights shine everywhere, and shine in vain for a populace which would as soon have time off.

Walker would have power over the place, at least in imagination. He insists that it is fiction, a painted face put together by hard hats on scaffolding. He insists on mere flesh, on fatigue, destitution, breakdown, on frailty under the signs in Times Square. And as for 'no real purpose', he might have doubts about that; once out of the searching light of day they are prone to pornography and palmistry, and a prey to gross appetite. He would then encapsulate the whole gullible, leaden-footed scene in a word or two; that aetherial woman in the children's Zoo is a summing up New York-style, prosaic, graceless, glad of respite. He is a metonymist, and metonymy is the trope of power, a diminishing reductive figure through which the point can be put over in brief, in a word or phrase – a shorthand, a New York trope in fact, saving all the bother with fusion, Oneness, muddled identity which metaphor brings. Why add to the confusion? New York Inside Out appeared in 1984 at \$15, but might never have reached us.



