

POETRY

Walter de la Mare

Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht

Walter de la Mare (1873–1956), roughly a contemporary of Robert Frost but by temperament more akin to Thomas Hardy and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was too poor to continue his education beyond St. Paul's Cathedral Choir School in London, and became a book-keeper at an English branch of Standard Oil, at which cheerless work he continued for 18 years. By the age of 35 he had published his first collection of poems anonymously, and the first of his five novels, one of which, *Memoirs of a Midget*, published in 1921, is a brilliant, moving and unsettling work. He is also the compiler of that extraordinary "collection of rhymes and poems for the young of all ages" called *Come Hither*, one of the finest anthologies of poetry for young readers, and one that deeply enriched the youthful reading of W. H. Auden. Later Auden was to write with characteristic shrewdness of "the delicacy of his metrical fingering and the graceful architecture of his stanzas." De la Mare's poetry is richly, sometimes dreamily, melodic, and the subtlety and skill of his prosody probably derives in part from his familiarity with folk literature and traditional English nursery rhymes. Witness the titles of some of his books: *Songs of Childhood* (1902), *A Child's Day: A Book of Rhymes to Pictures by C. W. Cadby* (1912), *Peacock Pie: A Book of Rhymes* (1913), *Down-adown-derry: A Book of Fairy Poems* (1922), and *Poems for Children* (1930). But readers should immediately be warned against supposing such titles promise a poetry that is "twee" or sentimental. De la Mare was keenly aware that the imagination of a child is haunted by spirits, ghosts, crime, and danger, as well as by moods of deep sorrow and overpowering fear. And, of course, other volumes of his verse (*The Listeners*, *Motley*, *The Veil*, *The Fleeting*) are not concerned with children nor addressed to them.

Though de la Mare is not much noticed or praised these days, and his work is absent from a number of standard anthologies, it is worth remembering that he was once much honored, and his words resounded in the ears of a considerable readership. When C. K. Scott Moncrieff turned Marcel Proust into English, he transformed the title of the whole work, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, into a well-known phrase from one of Shakespeare's sonnets, *Remembrance of Things Past*; and when he transformed the title of one of that work's sections, *Albertine disparue*, into an English phrase that also would generate literary resonance, he turned to the last line of a poem of de la Mare's for *The Sweet Cheat Gone* (from "The Ghost").

The British Crown made the poet a Companion of Honor in 1948, and he was named a member of the Order of Merit in 1953 and an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Perhaps more tellingly still, his fellow O.M., T. S. Eliot, in a tribute prepared for de la Mare's 75th birthday, composed the following poem:

When the nocturnal traveler can arouse
No sleeper by his call; or when by chance
An empty face peers from an empty house,

By whom: and by what means was this designed?
The whispered incantation which allows
Free passage to the phantoms of the mind?

By you: by those deceptive cadences
Wherewith the common measure is refined;
By conscious art practiced with natural ease;

By the delicate invisible web you wove—
An inexplicable mystery of sound.

Eliot draws attention to “deceptive cadences,” and truly de la Mare’s prosody deserves the most careful and reverent study. But Eliot also points to “The whispered incantation which allows/ Free passage to the phantoms of the mind,” and which concerns the summoning up of the uncanny, some spectral world within and about us. This fascination with the darker imaginative realms has not always been looked upon with critical approval. I. A. Richards regretted that “no intimation of the contemporary situation sounds” in de la Mare’s poetry, and goes on to say that “he is writing of, and from, a world which knows nothing of these difficulties, a world of pure fantasy for which the distinction between knowledge and feeling has not yet dawned,” which sounds suspiciously like an accusation of emotional and mental backwardness. And even when, as sometimes happens, de la Mare allows some brutal reality to invade his poems, Richards declares that he voices “an impulse to turn away, to forget it, to seek shelter in the warmth of his own familiar thickets of dream, not to stay out in the wind. His rhythm, that indescribable personal note which clings to all his best poetry, is a lulling rhythm, an anodyne, an opiate, it gives sleep and visions, phantasmagoria; but it does not give vision, it does not awaken.”

The tone here is that of a grumpy teacher, scolding some youth who has failed to concentrate on the table of logarithms. In essence, Richards is charging de la Mare with writing a sort of unmanly, escapist poetry. Indictments of the same sort were once brought against Yeats as well as Keats. And it is not easy to reconcile this charge with such a poem as “In the Dock,” which is included here. In any case, the richly evocative voice, the metrical inventiveness and syntactical ingenuity, the lovely imaginative power and slightly dated locutions, the archaic charm of a world steeped in mystery, are to be encountered in the first, enchanting stanza of “All That’s Past”:

Very old are the woods;
 And the buds that break
Out of the brier’s boughs,
 When March winds wake,
So old with their beauty are—
 Oh, no man knows
Through what wild centuries
 Roves back the rose.

Isaac Meek

An Epitaph

Hook-nosed was I, loose-lipped; greed fixed its gaze
In my young eyes ere they knew brass from gold;
Doomed to the blazing market-place my days—
A sweated chafferer of the bought and sold.
Fawned on and spat at, flattered and decried—
One only thing men asked of me—my price.
I lived, detested; and deserted, died,
Scorned by the virtuous, and the jest of vice.
And now, behold, blest child of Christ, my worth;
Stoop close: I have inherited the earth!

The Fat Woman

Massed in her creaseless black,
She sits; vast and serene;
Light—on glossed hair, large knees,
Huge bust—a-sheen.

A smile lurks deep in her eyes,
Thick-lidded, motionless, pale,
Taunting a world grown old,
Faded, and stale.

Enormous those childless breasts:
God in His pity knows
Why, in her bodice stuck,
Reeks a mock rose.

The Moth

Isled in the midnight air,
Musked with the dark's faint bloom,
Out into glooming and secret haunts
The flame cries, 'Come!'

Lovely in dye and fan,
A-tremble in shimmering grace,
A moth from her winter swoon
Uplifts her face:

Stares from her glamorous eyes;
Wafts her on plumes like mist;
In ecstasy swirls and sways
To her strange tryst.

Drugged

Inert in his chair,
In a candle's guttering glow;
His bottle empty,
His fire sunk low;
With drug-sealed lids shut fast,
Unsated mouth ajar,
This darkened phantasm walks
Where nightmares are:

In a frenzy of life and light,
Crisscross—a menacing throng—
They gibe, the squeal at the stranger,
Jostling along,
Their faces cadaverous grey:
While on high from an attic stare
Horrors, in beauty apparelled,
Down in the dark air.

A stream gurgles over its stones,
The chambers within are a-fire.
Stumble his shadowy feet
Through shine, through mire;
And the flames leap higher.
In vain yelps the wainscot mouse;
In vain beats the hour;
Vacant, his body must drowse
Until daybreak flower—

Staining these walls with its rose,
And the draughts of the morning shall stir
Cold on cold brow, cold hands.
And the wanderer
Back to flesh house must return.
Lone soul—in horror to see,
Than dream more meagre and awful,
Reality.

Incantation

Vervain . . . basil . . . orison—
Whisper their syllablings till all meaning is gone,
And sound all vestige loses of mere word. . . .
'Tis then as if, in some far childhood heard,
A wild heart languished at the call of a bird
Crying through ruinous windows, high and fair,
A secret incantation on the air:
A language lost; which, when its accents cease,
Breathes, voiceless, of a pre-Edenic peace.

In the Dock

Pallid, mis-shapen he stands. The World's grimed thumb,
Now hooked securely in his matted hair,
Has haled him struggling from his poisonous slum
And flung him, mute as fish, close-netted there.

His bloodless hands entalon that iron rail.
He gloats in beastlike trance. His settling eyes
From staring face to face rove on—and quail.
Justice for carrion pants; and these the flies.

Voice after voice in smooth impartial drone
Erects horrific in his darkening brain
A timber framework, where agape, alone
Bright life will kiss good-bye the cheek of Cain.

Sudden like wolf he cries; and sweats to see
When howls man's soul, it howls inaudibly.

The Suicide

Did these night-hung houses,
Of quiet, starlit stone,
Breathe not a whisper—'Stay,
Thou unhappy one;
Whither so secret away?'

Sighed not the unfriending wind,
Chill with nocturnal dew,
'Pause, pause, in thy haste,
O thou distraught! I too
Tryst with the Atlantic waste.'

Steep fell the drowsy street;
In slumber the world was blind:
Breathed not one midnight flower
Peace in thy broken mind?—
'Brief, yet sweet, is life's hour.'

Syllabled thy last tide—
By as dark moon stirred,
And doomed to forlorn unrest—
Not one compassionate word? . . .
'Cold is this breast.'

Speech

The robin's whistled stave
Is tart as half-ripened fruit;
Wood-sooth from bower of leaves
The blackbird's flute;
Shrill-small the ardent wren's;
And the thrush, and the long-tailed tit—
Each hath its own apt tongue,
 Shrill, harsh, or sweet.

The meanings they may bear
Is long past ours to guess—
What sighs the wind, of the past,
In the wilderness?
Man also in ancient words
His thoughts may pack,
But if he not sing them too,
 Music they lack.

Oh, never on earth was bird,
Though perched on Arabian tree,
Nor instrument echoing heaven
Made melody strange as he;
Since even his happiest speech
Cries of his whither and whence,
And in mere sound secretes
 His inmost sense.

Night

All from the light of the sweet moon
 Tired men now lie abed;
Actionless, full of visions, soon
 Vanishing, soon sped.

The starry night aflock with beams
 Of crystal light scarce stirs:
Only its birds—the cocks, the streams,
 Call 'neath heaven's wanderers.

All's silent; all hearts still;
 Love, cunning, fire, fallen low:
When faint morn straying on the hill
 Sighs, and his soft airs flow.

The Mermaids

Sand, sand; hills of sand;
And the wind where nothing is
Green and the sweet of the land;
No grass, no trees,
No bird, no butterfly,
But hills, hills of sand,
And a burning sky.

Sea, sea; mounds of the sea,
Hollow, and dark, and blue,
Flashing incessantly
The whole sea through;
No flower, no jutting root,
Only the floor of the sea,
With foam afloat.

Blow, blow, winding shells;
And the watery fish,
Deaf to the hidden bells,
In the waters plash;
No streaming gold, no eyes,
Watching along the waves,
But far-blown shells, faint bells,
From the darkling caves.

Good-bye

The last of last words spoken is, Good-bye—
The last dismantled flower in the weed-grown hedge,
The last thin rumour of a feeble bell far ringing,
The last blind rat to spurn the mildewed rye.

A hardening darkness glasses the haunted eye,
Shines into nothing the watcher's burnt-out candle,
Wreathes into scentless nothing the wasting incense,
Faints in the outer silence the hunting-cry.

Love of its muted music breathes no sigh,
Thought in her ivory tower gropes in her spinning,
Toss on in vain the whispering trees of Eden,
Last of all last words spoken is, Good-bye.