

The Poetry of Walter de la Mare

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FOR MANY years past Walter de la Mare has occupied a curious position in the story of twentieth-century English poetry. Most children know some of his poems, rhymes and verses (the terms are those employed by de la Mare himself); and adults who seldom open a volume of poetry are familiar with his name and even with one or two of his poems, such as 'The Listeners'. The award of the Order of Merit marked his complete acceptance by the official literary-cum-political world; the tributes paid to his artistry over a period of fifty years by such diverse writers as Ford Madox Ford, Pound, Middleton Murry and W. H. Auden are a proof that he was admired by 'modern' poets and critics. Yet from the early 1930s onwards he was ignored, or uneasily dismissed, by most of the influential younger men who formed public taste in poetry. He was omitted by Michael Roberts from *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936), and there can be little doubt that this omission caused him to be undervalued by most intelligent readers of poetry born, let us say, between 1915 and 1940.

The publication of *The Complete Poems of Walter de la Mare* (1969) enables us to survey the whole of his poetic achievement. For here, in this bulky volume, which runs to 948 pages, we have not only the contents of all the individual collections of poems, but a host of poems from other sources — poems from prose and miscellaneous works, poems never published in book form, and unpublished poems. The literary trustees, aided by Leonard Clark, who edited this volume, were probably right in their decision to include so much diverse material. A few of the poems first published after *O Lovely England* (1953) and some of the later unpublished poems are up to standard, though none ranks with de la Mare's finest work. But the generally inferior quality of the *Uncollected Poems* and the *Unpublished Poems* merely underlines the wisdom of de la Mare's decision to exclude them from the canon during his lifetime.

Some of de la Mare's admirers have done his reputation a disservice by harping on his dream-like magic, his romantic fantasy, his exquisite music. It is all the more salutary that his most recent critic, Luce Bonnerot, should have subjected his work to a rigorous and penetrating scrutiny. *L'Œuvre de Walter de la Mare* (1969) takes as its field the whole of his writings, and much of Madame Bonnerot's argument lies beyond the scope of this essay. I shall, however, from time to time, draw on her book, which will from now onwards be an indispensable guide to anybody who takes seriously the achievement of de la Mare; and I trust that an English version of her work may be made available to readers in Britain and the U.S.A.

De la Mare's poetry does not lend itself readily to the mode of critical analysis favoured by academics, who deploy it with the mechanical fluency of a seasoned professional demonstrating the cover drive. Sir Walter Raleigh's observation about Christina Rossetti's work applies with equal force to the poetry of de la Mare:

The worst of it is that you cannot lecture on really pure poetry any more than you can talk about the ingredients of pure water — it is adulterated, methylated, sanded poetry that makes the best lectures.

Nor is it helpful to examine de la Mare's biography, or to trace the chronology of his poems. It is clear from a reading of his verse that de la Mare experienced private griefs and guilt, like all reflective human beings, but I doubt whether an account of his intimate life would add much to our understanding of his art. All has been transmuted — 'those are pearls that were his eyes'. An attempt to chart the development of his art is scarcely more rewarding. He began to write in the last years of Victoria's reign, and continued to practice his craft until the early years of Elizabeth II. Yet it is extremely difficult to divide his work into periods, and to refer to early or late de la Mare. I can think of no English poet of comparable merit in whose work there is so little change or progression, unless it be Robert Herrick. W. H. Auden indeed speaks of de la Mare's 'steady, patient and successful endeavour to eliminate the overly arty diction which was a vice of his Pre-Raphaelite forbears', and points to the late appearance of a 'metaphysical' vein in his verse. In my view,

however, the finest of his poems, no matter what their date of composition, are almost entirely free from the Pre-Raphaelite tinge of artiness:

Winter is fallen early
 On the house of Stare;
 Birds in reverberating flocks
 Haunt its ancestral box;
 Bright are the plenteous berries
 In clusters in the air.

What could be more restrained and austere than such a stanza? Yet it comes from a poem, 'The Children of Stare', published in *Poems* (1906). And, as Luce Bonnerot remarks, the 'metaphysical' vein reveals itself at the beginning of his career in 'Where Is Thy Victory?', which also comes from *Poems* (1906):

Even if no more my shadow may
 Lean for a moment in thy day;
 No more the whole earth lighten, as if,
 Thou near, it had nought else to give:
 Surely 'tis but Heaven's strategy
 To prove death immortality . . .

Innocent children out of nought
 Build up a universe of thought,
 And out of silence fashion Heaven:
 So, dear, is this poor dying even,
 Seeing thou shalt be touched, heard, seen,
 Better than when dust stood between.

It is not easy even to ascribe a date to many of his poems. Some pieces included in *Inward Companion* (1950) and in *O Lovely England* (1953) had been composed fifty years earlier. I am convinced that certain poems in those volumes, such as 'Lost World' and 'De Profundis' are the work of his old age; but I should not 'date' with much confidence a large proportion of the poems in these two collections.

De la Mare's failure to develop steadily or even greatly to change in the course of a long lifetime is proof, if proof were needed, that he is not one of our major poets. Nor should we blind ourselves to his weaknesses and his limitations. One of the merits of Luce Bonnerot's study is its refusal to burke the fact that much of de la Mare's verse is facile and over-sweet. His

fondness for fabulous names and for the deformations of children's speech; his reliance on such words as 'brood', 'tryst', 'transient'; his apparent belief that the poetic involves the use of arch diction and a heavy sprinkling of conventional poeticalities — these are serious flaws in the art of a man who is sometimes held to be a flawless poet. There are also too many traces of Poe in his verse: whatever view we may take of Poe's stature as a writer, his influence on later English poets has been wholly baneful.

Yet even here, as Luce Bonnerot reminds us, we must draw the relevant distinctions. De la Mare's use of Northern dialect words, or of words found in the Ballads, like his employment of certain archaisms, is often artistically justified, since it lends precision to the verse and evokes with masterly economy the required emotional atmosphere. Nor was de la Mare an uncritical disciple of Poe for, as he himself observes, 'it is in early youth . . . that Poe waylays his victim'.

Luce Bonnerot dismisses the charge that de la Mare turns his back on reality and enchants us with a poetry of escape. There are strains of terror, despair and darkness in his verse and prose alike; a note of reserve, even of disgust, when he deals with sexuality; a sense of degradation and horror in such poems as 'Drugged' and 'The Bottle', a stern, prophetic condemnation of 'Plague-stricken Vanity Fair' in 'News':

These of the mincing gait,
And an ape in each sidelong leer;
These for the Way that is strait
To the pomp-hung bier;
These of the wasted dream,
Of the loveless silver and gold,
And the worm of disgust in them
That shall never grow old.

As Luce Bonnerot puts it, de la Mare has not turned his back on life but sought truth behind the facade which some call life; his purpose is not to lull but to awaken us. In this Ariel-dominated poetry Ariel exists to serve Prospero.

While agreeing with this argument I should make one important reservation. There is one area of human experience which de

la Mare totally ignores, the realm of social life. Man, for him, is a Pilgrim, a Traveller, a Visitant, never a political animal. As a young man he worked for some unhappy years for the Anglo-American Oil Company, including a spell in the bureau of statistics. During the 1914-18 war he was employed in the department responsible for sugar rationing. It is a fair criticism to say that the smell of oil (except for anointing) and the privations of modern war do not affect his verse in any way. Warfare is almost always presented in a legendary setting or with medieval trappings. Even in 'Dry August Burned', where horse-drawn field artillery thuds by, and in 'Immanent', with its reference to a war-plane, the emphasis is on a child corrupted by the cruelty inherent in life. The frivolous group in 'The Feckless Dinner-Party' enjoys a moment only of social unity before being plunged into a solitary hell like that of Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel*. And while de la Mare does not shun the exploration of evil, it is always the kind of menacing, hallucinatory state anatomized by Alethea Hayter in *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*. His universe is incurably solipsistic: when he ventures into the world of social beings the result is disquieting, as may be seen in an apparently unmotivated outburst of fear and hatred entitled 'In The Public Service' (one of the *Unpublished Poems*). Auden comments on his inability to recall coming across in de la Mare's work 'a single proper Name, whether of a person or place, which one could identify as a real historical name'. There are, in fact, a few passing references to Kings and Queens, to Herod and Judas Iscariot, and to Thomas Campion. But 'Napoleon', the only one of his poems devoted to an historical personage, bears out my contention about the solipsism of what Luce Bonnerot calls 'l'univers Delamarien':

'What is the world, O soldiers?
It is I.
I, this incessant snow,
This northern sky;
Soldiers, this solitude
Through which we go
Is I.'

It is wise to acknowledge that there is a distressingly large amount of nineteenth-century Romantic detritus in the poetry

of de la Mare, so long as its presence does not blind us to his merits and his achievements. Even his most severe critics have paid tribute to his 'fingering', a term employed by George Saintsbury to describe a poet's gift 'of getting the utmost possible out of metres borrowed or invented'. One example of his extraordinary mastery of cadence is 'The Ghost', which opens with a stanza of the utmost economy of gesture and movement:

'Who knocks?' 'I, who was beautiful,
Beyond all dreams to restore,
I, from the roots of the dark thorn am hither.
And knock on the door.'

There are four more stanzas in the poem; all five stanzas differ from one another minutely in their metrical and syllabic pattern, yet the casual reader would experience a harmony apparently based on an undeviating metrical regularity.

There are dozens of similar felicities in de la Mare's poems. Every reader of his work will have his own favourite examples. I should like to quote the whole of that marvellous early poem, 'The Miracle', the exquisite 'Never More, Sailor', and a poem for children, 'The Storm'; but must content myself with one stanza from this latter poem:

Soon there were five of us, soon there were nine of us,
And lo! in a trice sixteen!
And the yeasty surf curdled over the sands,
The gaunt grey rocks between;
And the tempest raved, and the lightning's fire
Struck blue on the spindrift hoar —
And on four of us — aye, and on four times four of us
Sea-birds on the shore.

W. H. Auden has noted de la Mare's affinities with the Elizabethan song-writers, Christina Rossetti and Thomas Hardy; to which list I should add the names of Beddoes and of Blake. He shares with them not only the mastery of cadence to which I have already referred but also the ability to select with unerring skill the word, phrase or image which brings a passage into exact poetic focus and stamps a poem with the distinctive mark of imaginative power. The second stanza of 'Fare Well' provides one of the most notable examples of this accomplishment:

Oh, when this my dust surrenders
 Hand, foot, lip, to dust again,
 May these loved and loving faces
 Please other men!
 May the rusting harvest hedgerow
 Still the Traveller's Joy entwine,
 And as happy children gather
 Posies once mine.

Almost every word contributes to the total design of the stanza, recalling us to an awareness of our common humanity. One of the most delicate touches is the repetition of the word *dust*, with its echoing of the service for the burial of the dead. Equally subtle is the placing of the word *posies*, which evokes so tellingly the simplicity and innocence of a rustic childhood. The supreme master-stroke, however, is the adjective *rusting*. A. E. Housman first read this poem in a version disfigured by the misprint *rustling*, and immediately divined the correct reading. For he judged it inconceivable that a poet of de la Mare's calibre could have employed an epithet which, in the context, would have been inert and banal. Housman's reputation as a classical scholar rests in part upon his emendation of corrupt Latin texts. He is also one of the best minor poets in the English language; and it is instructive to observe how he recognizes and salutes his peer.

This aspect of de la Mare's poetry is so well known that it would be superfluous to linger on it or to demonstrate it by a mass of quotations. It may be less of a commonplace to insist that some of his most accomplished and moving poems exhibit qualities which are not generally associated with his work — a sombre meditative wisdom, an austere portrayal of landscape, a piercing awareness of human desolation. The number of such poems increases in the later volumes: the following quotations are all taken from volumes published in 1938 or later:

This blue-washed, old, thatched summerhouse —
 Paint scaling, and fading from its walls —
 How often from its hingeless door
 I have watched — dead leaf, like the ghost of a mouse,
 Rasping the worn brick floor —

The snows of the weir descending below,
And their thunderous waterfall.

(‘The Old Summerhouse’)

Three gables; clustered chimney-stacks; a wall
Snowed every Spring with cherry, gage, and pear,
Now suckered, rank, unpruned. Green-seeded, tall,
A drift of sullen nettles souring near.

(‘The Vacant Farmhouse’)

Why, inward companion, are you so dark with anguish?
A trickle of rancid water that oozes and veers,
Picking its sluggish course through slag and refuse,
Down at length to the all-oblivious ocean —
What else were apt comparison for your tears?

(‘Lost World’)

Most wounds can Time repair;
But some are mortal — these:
For a broken heart there is no balm,
No cure for a heart at ease —

At ease, but cold as stone,
Though the intellect spin on,
And the feat and practised face may show
Nought of the life that is gone;

But smiles, as by habit taught;
And sighs, as by custom led;
And the soul within is safe from damnation,
Since it is dead.

(‘At Ease’)

De la Mare’s world is dark and grief-stricken. In poem after poem we are reminded that death awaits us all, often in tones of urgency and pain. ‘Waiting’, ‘Reserved’, two poems entitled ‘The House’, and ‘The Corner Stone’, seem to me to rank with his most memorable achievements. Some of his finest poems for children, ‘Nobody Knows’, ‘The Song of the Mad Prince’, ‘Hi!’, are suffused with an aching sense of mortality.

It would be wrong to claim that his world is void of religious values. An acceptance of the mystery of things, a sense of wonder at the strange enchantment of the world, an abiding emotion of awe and reverence — these are strong religious elements in his poetry. He responds intuitively to the image of the Christ-child,

and accepts the gospel of loving-kindness; yet there is, in l'univers Delamarien, little orthodox faith and less Christian hope.

In every sense of the word the end of man's pilgrimage is nothingness:

... and thou must come,
Hating thy journey, homeless, home.
(‘Haunted’)

Somewhere there Nothing is; and there lost Man
Shall win what changeless vague of peace he can.
(‘The Tryst’)

Oh, from wide circuit, shall at length I see
Pure daybreak lighten again on Eden's tree?
Loosed from remorse and hope and love's distress,
Enrobe me again in my lost nakedness?
No more with wordless grief a loved one grieve,
But to Heaven's nothingness re-welcome Eve?
(‘The Exile’)

This last stanza is very close in spirit to a passage from D. H. Lawrence's ‘Love’, published in the *English Review*, January 1918:

How then will it matter if we travel heavenwards, *ad infinitum*, or in the opposite direction, to infinity? Since the infinity obtained is the same in either case, the infinity of pure homogeneity, which is nothingness, or everythingness, it does not matter which.

This similarity of tone¹ may seem less astonishing if we remember that de la Mare had, a year or two earlier, written a favourable review of *The Rainbow*, which was never published, since Lawrence's novel was withdrawn from circulation.

Luce Bonnerot suggests that for de la Mare, as for Claudel, the music of poetry is ‘une incantation qui nous délie de notre lien mortel’. It is truer to say that he accepts with extraordinary calmness and firmness the fetters of our mortality, and that he has indicated the nature of his achievement in one of his most characteristic and haunting poems, ‘For all the grief’:

¹ My daughter has pointed this out to me. I am not, however, suggesting that de la Mare had read Lawrence's essay. ‘The Exile’ had appeared in book form in 1917.

For all the grief I have given with words
 May now a few clear flowers blow,
 In the dust, and the heat, and the silence of birds,
 Where the friendless go.

For the thing unsaid that heart asked of me
 Be a dark, cool water calling — calling
 To the footsore, benighted, solitary
 When the shadows are falling.

O, be beauty for all my blindness,
 A moon in the air where the weary wend,
 And dews burdened with loving-kindness
 In the dark of the end.

Ashurbanipal

When in the diamond clarity of dawn,
 in a long-forgotten springtime,
 Ashurbanipal went riding out
 through the great gate of Nineveh,
 he never for one moment cast a glance
 towards the human skins upon the walls,
 the tattered corpses impaled on spikes.

Acknowledging the adulation
 of his people, returning the salute
 of the Royal Guard, tall and upright
 on his proudly trotting sleek black mare,
 he passed beneath the massive winged bulls,
 the sculptured reliefs recording his victories,
 over the narrow bridge to the waiting plain.

Then being fresh from sleep and eager
 for the chase, he went galloping away,
 accompanied by a troop of mounted bowmen,
 towards the promise of the impassive hills.

RAYMOND TONG