

# WALTER DE LA MARE: POET OF TISHNAR

By Llewellyn Jones

WALTER DE LA MARE has been an easy subject for reviewers. They tell us that he is the poet of one mood, that he deals in "white magic" — whatever that may be — and they lay especial stress upon his child poems. Here there is a permissible variation. If the reviewer is an unmarried youth he always adds that the child rhymes are too good for children — that only older people will appreciate them. But if he is a father he tries the poems out on his own children and does not make any such absurd statement.

Of these rhymes for and about children the greater number and the best will be found in "Peacock Pie" — included in the two volume collection of Mr. de la Mare's poetry published in 1920. A number not included in that book will be found in the book of Pamela Bianco's drawings, "Flora", for which Mr. de la Mare wrote poems illustrating the drawings — thus reversing the usual order. The poems of both books which are more especially for children have been collected, together with a few new poems, in "Down - Adown - Derry", published a year ago with drawings by Dorothy Lathrop, who also illustrated Mr. de la Mare's "The Three Mulla-Mulgars". And now comes the new edition of "A Child's Day" (first published in England in 1912), with illustrations by Winifred Bromhall.

Miss Bianco's drawings — exhibited when she was twelve years old — have inspired Mr. de la Mare — over forty

and with children older than Pamela — to poetry that will appeal not only to other children Pamela's age but to their elders as well. Such stanzas as:

Suppose and suppose, when the gentle star  
    of evening  
    Came crinkling into the blue  
A magical castle we saw in the air, like a  
    cloud of moonlight  
    As onward we flew.

—although perhaps few children would stop to envy, as another poet might, the happiness of "crinkle". Miss Bianco's drawing of a little girl entitled "Divine Delight" has moved Mr. de la Mare to the following reflection, a far from childlike one:

Dark, dark this mind, if ever in vain it rove  
The face of man in search of hope and love;  
Or, turning inward from earth's sun and  
    moon,  
Spin in cold solitude thought's mazed cocoon.  
Fresh hang Time's branches. Hollow in  
    space out-cry  
The grave-toned trumpets of Eternity.  
World of divine delight! heart whispereth  
Though all its all lie but 'twixt birth and  
    death.

Though it is called a collection of "fairy poems" the selection in "Down-Adown-Derry" exhibits more than one side of Mr. de la Mare's genius. "Sam's Three Wishes; or Life's Little Whirligig" is a humorous rendering of Nietzsche's Eternal Return — achieved, however, by an old farmer who innocently wished that his youth might come back. On the other hand we have such a gravely beautiful poem as "The Sunken Garden":

Speak not — whisper not;  
Here bloweth thyme and bergamot;

Softly on the evening hour,  
 Secret herbs their spices shower.  
 Dark-spiked rosemary and myrrh,  
 Lean-stalked purple lavender;  
 Hides within her bosom, too,  
 All her sorrows, bitter rue.  
 Breathe not — trespass not;  
 Of this green and darkling spot,  
 Latticed from the moon's beams,  
 Perchance a distant dreamer dreams:  
 Perchance upon its darkening air,  
 The unseen ghosts of children fare,  
 Faintly swinging, sway and sweep,  
 Like lovely sea-flowers in its deep;  
 While, unmoved, to watch and ward,  
 Amid its gloomed and daisied sward,  
 Stands with bowed and dewy head  
 That one little leaden Lad.

The rather common mistake, in this country at least, of calling Mr. de la Mare a Georgian poet may sidetrack readers who do not know his work well. His first book, "Songs of Childhood", was written in 1902, and even his best known work, "The Listeners", came out in 1912 before the label "Georgian" had been thought of. And of course he has written as much prose as he has verse: "Henry Brocken", 1904; "The Three Mulla-Mulgars", 1910, printed in America with illustrations by Dorothy Lathrop, 1919; "The Return", a novel which won the Polignac Prize in 1911 or 1912, reissued in America in 1922; while his greatest prose work, "The Memoirs of a Midget", was one of the outstanding books of 1922. He has also written a critical brochure, "Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination".

We shall return to these books later, but meanwhile merely note how unfair it is to call the author of such a list of works the poet of a single mood. He has, indeed, a special territory and it is that of Tishnar. And as this country has been inadequately mapped we must refer the reader to "The Three Mulla-Mulgars". In a footnote in that book Mr. de la Mare explains Tishnar:

Tishnar is a very ancient word in Munza, and means that which cannot be thought about in words, or told, or expressed. So all the wonderful, secret, and quiet world beyond the Mulgars' lives is Tishnar — winds and stars, too, the endless sea and the endless unknown.

In this particular book — the adventures of three mulla-mulgars, monkeys of a royal breed who are traversing the jungle to find their hereditary country, the word is used in a more restricted sense than that given above. But in its wider sense it is Mr. de la Mare's own "Arabia Deserta" which he alone has mapped. His preoccupation with it is given us in many of his most musical poems, such as "Arabia":

Far are the shades of Arabia  
 Where the Princes ride at noon,  
 'Mid the verdurous vales and thickets,  
 Under the ghost of the moon;  
 And so dark is that vaulted purple  
 Flowers in the forest rise  
 And toss into blossom 'gainst the phantom  
                   stars  
 Pale in the noonday skies.

Sweet is the music of Arabia  
 In my heart when out of dreams  
 I still in the thin, clear mirk of dawn  
 Desery her gliding streams;  
 Hear her strange lutes on the green banks  
 Ring loud with the grief and delight  
 Of the dim-silken, dark-haired Musicians  
 In the brooding silence of night.

They haunt me — her lutes and her forests;  
 No beauty on earth I see  
 But shadowed with that dream recalls  
 Her loveliness to me:  
 Still eyes look coldly upon me,  
 Cold voices whisper and say —  
 "He is crazed with the spell of far Arabia,  
 They have stolen his wits away."

The beauty of that poem speaks for itself. Its actual music is new — and the Georgians have recognized the beauty of Mr. de la Mare's rhythmical effects and have occasionally tried to imitate them. But they are of a sort that is especially hard to imitate. Any reader who already possesses the two volumes of collected poems and

the later collection, "The Veil", could suggest poem after poem that might be quoted here. "The Listeners" I should never think of quoting because anyone who knows anything at all about contemporary poetry knows it and knows that it is one of the best poems of its kind written in England for the last fifty years — indeed it belongs with "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel".

But here is a little poem much less known which perhaps shows that Mr. de la Mare is as far from being an imagist as one could be:

They told me Pan was dead, but I  
Oft marveled who it was that sang  
Down the green valleys languidly  
Where the grey elder thickets hang.

Sometimes I thought it was a bird  
My soul had charged with sorcery;  
Sometimes it seemed my own heart heard  
Inland the sorrow of the sea.

But even where the primrose sets  
The seal of its pale loveliness,  
I found amid the violets  
Tears of an antique bitterness.

Ask any poet what he would give to achieve such a last line as that, and if he be a real poet he will answer you, five years of his life.

We have already in quoting "They Told Me" passed from the mood of Arabia into a more open air mood, and as so much has been made of Mr. de la Mare's adventures on the psychic borderland I am anxious to call attention to achievement of a different order. He is not only an emotional writer but a shrewd writer, and he has attempted something unique in poetic character painting. This is no less than a series of short blank verse "Characters from Shakespeare". That was a large order. We know what critics do to Shakespeare's characters, and we know that it is so difficult to do that they have even called in psycho-

analysis to help them. To criticize Shakespeare according to Croce's idea of criticism — which is recreation — is more difficult still. Mr. de la Mare has not only attempted that but he has put his recreations into poetical form: that is to say he tries to meet Shakespeare not partly on his own ground as the Crocean critic would, but wholly on it. I think that these poems have not had anything like the notice they deserve. Here is one of them — to take a well known character:

Umbrageous cedars murmuring symphonies  
Stooped in late twilight o'er dark Denmark's  
Prince:

He sat, his eyes companioned with dream —  
Lustrous large eyes that held the world in  
view

As some entranced child's a puppet show.  
Darkness gave birth to the all-trembling  
stars,

And a far roar of long-drawn cataracts,  
Flooded immeasurable night with sound.  
He sat so still, his very thoughts took wing,  
And, highest Ariels, the stillness haunted  
With midge-like measures; but, at last, even  
they

Sank 'neath the influences of his night.  
The sweet dust shed faint perfume in the  
gloom;

Through all wild space the stars' bright  
arrows fell

On the lone Prince — the troubled son of  
man —

On Time's dark waters in unearthly trouble:  
Then, as the roar increased, and one fair  
tower

Of cloud took sky and stars with majesty,  
He rose, his face a parchment of old age,  
Sorrow hath scribbled o'er and o'er and o'er.

And, for shrewdness, we have Polonius:

There haunts in Time's bare house an active  
ghost

Enamoured of his name, Polonius.

He moves small fingers much, and all his  
speech

Is like a sampler of precisest words,

Set in the pattern of a simpleton. . . .

While the pathos of Hamlet is matched by that of Ophelia, with her last decision:

Better the glassy horror of the stream.

This clairvoyant ability to see wholly and walk around the characters created by other men informs the only prose work of Mr. de la Mare that has not been reprinted recently, "Henry Brocken". If any American publisher wishes to set an illustrator a task that can succeed only by some special grace, and reissue that book, he will be doing a service to every lover of literature—indeed he might well dispense with the illustrations.

Every imaginative reader enjoys a creative work for itself and then extends the figures in it or tries to get behind them. He thinks of something the poet or dramatist might have told us but did not. In "Henry Brocken" Mr. de la Mare does just that, but not as the casual reader would. He does it with a creative imagination which meets the first author more or less on his own ground. The framework of the story is this: An imaginative boy is brought up in solitude, in an old country house. In its library he reads all the imaginative triumphs of English literature. And a great itch to travel comes upon him:

But whither?

Now it seemed clear to me after long brooding and musing that however beautiful were these regions of which I never wearied to read, and however wild and faithful and strange and lovely the people of the books, somewhere the former must remain yet, somewhere in immortality serene, dwell they whom so many had spent life dreaming and writing about.

And one day, mounting upon a horse that comes he knows not whence, this youth rides off and visits, like Tom o' Bedlam, whose lines preface the book, the regions of which he had dreamed.

The book is written in a very beautiful poetic prose—numerous prose, the grammarians would call it—and

while it might be called a *tour de force*, it is an indubitably successful one. There is for instance the youth's meeting with the physician from "Macbeth". You remember the doctor in the fifth act of the play, who hears and sees Lady Macbeth as she walks in her sleep and tries to wash away the stains of Duncan's blood. This doctor is living eternally with his viol and his old songs. His visitor asks him about the tragedy, and we have in his answer a hint of a new view of the matter, as if, watching again the play from "in front", we could suddenly transport ourselves to another vantage point and see otherwise hidden expressions upon the faces of the characters. The effect cannot be reproduced here—and a very real effect it is—but we may quote a few of the introductory words to it, simply to exhibit Mr. de la Mare's glowing style in this book. This is the morning on which the wanderer, after sleeping in an old graveyard, meets the physician:

Surely some hueless poppy blossomed in the darkness of those ruins, or the soulless ashes of the dead breathe out a drowsy influence. Never have I slept so heavily, yet perhaps never beneath so cold a tester. Sunbeams streaming between the crests of the cypress awoke me. I leapt up as if a hundred sentinels had shouted—where none kept visible watch.

An odour of a languid sweetness pervaded the air. There was no wind to stir the dew-besprinkled trees. The old, scarred grave-stones stood in a thick sunshine, afloat with bees. But Rosinante had preferred to survey sunshine out of shade. In lush grass I found her, the picture of age, foot crook'd and head dejected.

The book is out of print, but that does not really matter to its predestined reader, who can easily get it by calling upon the aid of any dealer in first editions. My own copy, in a little worse than "fair" condition, cost only four dollars, and I have seen better

ones at six—but some day the book will join, in price, the other early books of its author which now hover around the twenty dollar mark.

As it is so much better known little need be said here of the “Memoirs of a Midget”. This is Mr. de la Mare’s masterpiece in prose and undoubtedly one of the permanent contributions of the twentieth century to English literature. It is the story of a woman midget, told from within. Of good family and with a soul as sensitive as one might imagine from her size and her heredity, she lives a life of intense imagination as a child, in a garden that to her is an adventurous wilderness, and in her grown up years has to face that wilder wilderness of human beings. In this book Mr. de la Mare is at once the poet of childhood and gardens and the realist who can depict with cruel accuracy the weak and the wicked.

But I have tried in the foregoing

notes to call attention rather to the less known than to the better known aspects of Mr. de la Mare’s genius. Of his poems many critics have spoken. It is no exaggeration to say that he stands alone among present day English poets. And it is wrong to regard him merely as a minor poet writing disconnected lyrics. His poems taken as a whole cover a high and connected terrain. His Tishnar is a country in which we may all recognize claims which we, too, have tried to stake out. It is a country of indefinable but nevertheless real mental states—a beyond that is within. And Mr. de la Mare is a philosopher with a categorical imperative for us. It is:

Look thy last on all things lovely,  
Every hour. Let no night  
Seal thy sense in deathly slumber  
Till to delight  
Thou have paid thy utmost blessings;  
Since that all things thou wouldst praise  
Beauty took from those who loved them  
In other days.

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# THE PARODY OUTLINE OF LITERATURE

## VIII: WITH MEEK APOLOGY TO THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY\*

By Aline Kilmer, Illustrated by Herb Roth

"EVERY sea is the sea:  
Why do we foolishly blame  
The Western Seas or the Cyclades?  
Are they not all the same?

"A puppy may drown in a puddle,  
A baby may drown in a font,  
You may be drowned in Long Island Sound,  
You in the Hellespont.

"Then let who will pray for fair weather:  
The harbor was fatal to me."  
Aristagoras said it before us:  
The sea is the sea.



\*A parody on the type of poem characteristic of "The Greek Anthology", in the style of Mrs. Kilmer's verse. This is the eighth instalment of the series in which various American authors, using well known classics, attempt to parody themselves.