**A Reconsideration of Walter de La Mare**

For some odd reason, on an outside wall of the Premier Inn in Guildford there are a few lines from Walter de la Mare’s most famous poem, *The Listeners.* It is a peculiar tribute to a poet, and one wonders what de la Mare would have made of it, given that he was apparently annoyed by the constant requests to anthologise this poem. More notably, though, it is reported that in 1928, Thomas Hardy, when dying, asked his wife to read this poem to him in the middle of the night, and said, ‘That is possibly the finest poem of the century’.

Despite such extraordinary praise, at least for this one poem, and the admiration of other major contemporaries, such as Robert Frost, de la Mare’s standing now is unclear. His manner is almost that of a Romantic poet in the original tradition, untouched by modernism, and yet he continued to write in this way up to his death in 1956. Some major Modernist critics, such as Richards and Leavis, saw him simply as an outstanding example of the allegedly faded neo-Romanticism of the late 19th  and early 20th century, which had failed to grasp what was required of a 20th century poet. Others, such as David Cecil, were still able, in 1973, on the centenary of de la Mare’s birth, to see him, somewhat anachronistically, as ‘the last great poet’ of the original Romantic tradition, without much concern for whether he had endeavoured to become a 20th century poet.

The last attempt to try and revive de la Mare’s largely neglected poetry for a wider, modern audience was made in 2016, on the 60th anniversary of his death, when Matthew Sweeney was asked by Faber to put together a *Selected Poems*. Sweeney happily confessed that it was *The Listeners,* that got him interested in poetry, ‘the mystery of it, the ghosts that populate it’. His selection from de la Mare features many of the still attractive poems for children, and perhaps intentionally, does not campaign that strongly for the adult poems. Also, there is little he can make of de la Mare’s uneventful life, a somewhat dull one compared to those of the original Romantics : the early years spent working in an oil company, a not entirely happy but steadfast marriage, the pleasure he took in his children, the tedious struggles for funds, the writing, the reviewing; there is little for headline writers.

Sweeney naturally notes the neglect into which de la Mare appears to have fallen. However, he is strangely uncertain of the reason for this and prefers to highlight de la Mare’s ‘perfect ear and staggering technical assurance’. But the neglect of a poet of ‘staggering’ technical gifts might make one wonder about the service to which those gifts were put, or the degree to which the reading public is much interested in mere technical gifts. Sweeney wonders if de la Mare’s poetry is ultimately ‘too quiet, too small’, but this would not explain, for instance, why the work of de la Mare’s close friend, Edward Thomas, which made a virtue of quietness, has risen considerably in reputation over the years. There is also a sense in which de la Mare’s brand of Romanticism is scarcely small or slight. He writes in *Futility,* for instance*,* about no less than the end of the world:

All this – thy world – an end shall make,

Planet to sun return again;

The universe, to sleep from wake,

In a last peace remain.

and Cecil proposed that, ostensibly at least, de la Mare is ‘concerned with some of the profoundest and most critical issues that confront the human soul’.

The issue may have been just de la Mare’s striking unwillingness, or inability, to make necessary adjustments as English poetry simply altered greatly in style from the 1920s onwards, as if he was confident that his earlier voice would always find an audience. He held persistently to a style that became more strikingly archaic as time went on, dotted with almost Keatsian diction:

Where the frail aspen her shadow leans

In midnight cold a-swoon

*Crazed*

Still many of the overt features of de la Mare’s poetry, the traditional forms and metres, the full rhymes, the quaint diction, were also to a considerable extent, features of Thomas Hardy’s poetry. And yet Hardy was regarded by both Richards and Leavis as a genuinely modern poet, and no less than Michael Schmidt happily says that Hardy is ‘the first essentially twentieth-century poet’. But it is notable that this is based more on Hardy’s intellectual outlook than formal aspects of his verse. Schmidt describes Hardy for instance as ‘familiar with Darwinism, acquainted with Einstein’s work, caught between a new scientific approach and the old religious dogmas’. It is as if to be a 20th century poet at the beginning of the 20th century was primarily to be able to face up to a certain set of intellectual problems, ones that did not much interest de la Mare.

For Richards, Hardy’s force was that he was apparently the poet ‘who has most steadily refused to be comforted in an age in which the temptation to seek comfort has been greatest’, whereas de la Mare was seen to be writing from ‘a world of pure phantasy’. Richards is not indifferent to de la Mare’s technical skill but is concerned that when de la Mare brings his particular kind of technical skill to *modern* experience (we are talking 1926) there is a serious misalignment, as if that kind of technical skill is entirely inappropriate. In particular, ‘His rhythm, that indescribable personal note which clings to all his best poetry’, becomes ‘an opiate, it gives sleep and visions … but it does not give *vision’.*

Richards’ distinguished student, Leavis, focused on de la Mare’s apparent weaknesses by comparing his poem *The Ghost* with Hardy’s *The Voice,* two poems which ostensibly address the same gloomy subject, ‘the emptiness of utter loss’. *The Ghost* is an important piece in the de la Mare canon, often regarded as his finest adult poem. In her biography of the poet, Theresa Whistler calls it, ‘the one lyric which puts him, if anything does, among the lasting English poets’. The poem’s opening stanza has a characteristic de la Mare beauty:

‘Who knocks?’ ‘I, who was beautiful,

Beyond all dreams to restore,

I, from the roots of the dark thorn am thither.

And knock on the door.’

It is significant therefore that Leavis regards this touchstone poem as a failure, and he proceeds to dismantle the poems’ devices, arguing that all de la Mare’s (staggering) technical flourishes and choices of diction militate against any real apprehension of loss; ‘the roots of the dark thorn’, he says, suggests dew, fragrance, and fairies rather than death and decay. ‘night sky starlit’ which might, in another context, suggest ‘the desolate, pygmy helplessness of man’ evokes, says Leavis, only enchantment, mystery, elves. The whole is ultimately called ‘insidious’.

Still, in 1963, a lot of this seemed to be forgotten as no less an admirer than Auden produced his own selection of de la Mare’s work and, with it, a more determined defence of the poet. Auden sidesteps modernist reservations about de la Mare with his distinction between what he calls the Ariel and the Prospero in every poet, the Ariel that sings and the Prospero that thinks. He defends de la Mare as an Ariel, a technically gifted songster for whom ‘verbal beauty is *almost* everything’. He is not that concerned about de la Mare’s intellectual outlook.

Auden wants to suggest, however, that there is more substance to de la Mare than is often thought. Beyond the technical gifts there is also something that for Auden distinguishes de la Mare from many of his Georgian contemporaries, who are seen as at risk of *gentility.* There is firstly de la Mare’s apparent sense ‘that what our senses perceive of the world about us is not all there is to know’ and secondly, and perhaps surprisingly, there is de la Mare’s ‘sense of evil’. This latter is surprising because the nub of the criticism of Richards and then of Leavis, had been that de la Mare is primarily a poet of *escape,* that there is never realization of *true* suffering, of *true* evil, that de la Mare’s characteristic rhythms and verbal tics do not permit him to square up to a real world in an appropriate way.

In 1932, Leavis noted that de la Mare had published no volume since *The Veil* in 1921, as if he had been unable to find a way of adapting his poetic manner to the requirements of a harsher, new time. He thought ‘a duller, heavier desolation’ had fallen over de la Mare’s poetry and he saw no way in which he could adapt to the requirements of the times and points to a poem like *In the Dock* as illustrative of de la Mare’s difficulties when he attempts to engage with ordinary reality. Certainly, there are obvious problems, despite what Auden says, when de la Mare tries to bring his jewel-like lyrical manner to bear on real evil, as in this stanza of *The Suicide:*

Sighed not the unfriending wind,

Chill with nocturnal dew,

‘Pause, pause, in thy haste

O thou distraught! I too

Tryst with the Atlantic waste.

In the 1960s, James Reeves also tried to revive de la Mare by issuing a selection of Georgian poetry that was supposedly relevant to that decade. Reeves seems more explicitly bored with modernism that Auden had been, and attempts to justify Georgian poetry on its own terms. He notes how modern poetry had become distrustful of ‘direct emotion’ of ‘a simple response to primary experience’ and of ‘direct passionate utterance’. The modern poet, he seems to lament, is obliged to be tortured. He also makes the not unimportant point that at least in their time the Georgian poets were *popular.* de la Mare *was* once popular, whereas modern poetry has probably lost some of the general audience that read poetry. And yet Reeves’ selections of de la Mare for the 1960s still do not feel quite right. The opening stanza of *Echo* recalls the faerie atmosphere of *The Ghost*

‘Who called?’ I said, and the words

Through the whispering glades,

Hither, thither, baffled the birds –

‘Who called? Who called?’

and in many ways confirms the idea that de la Mare found it hard to move on, that he was in fact fixed by his rhythmical habits and ageing diction that rapidly became outdated from the 1920s onwards.

Still, there remains *The Listeners,* and while Sweeney may worry that ‘The idea of being known by a single poem is a thing of horror to most poets’, there remains something truly memorable in Hardy’s admission that this was – at the time of his death – the finest poem that had been written in the 20th century. In addition, for some odd reason, there is also something significant in the appearance of a few lines from this still popular poem on the wall of the Premier Inn in Guildford.