



*Walter de la Mare*  
1873 - 1956

Most of us normally shun that fleeting sense of mystery which may come upon us in solitude, unexpectedly, with varying degrees of intensity. Perhaps to most of us the experience is more mystifying than mystical. We shake ourselves free, as from a strangely gripping daydream, to get on with the business of our lives.

Certain artists are endowed with creative imaginations of such power that their works seem to induce in us a similar strong emotional experience. In recent literature, Walter de la Mare is representative of one such artist. In some of his prose and poetry, he seems to compel us to glimpse almost some essential, ineffable truth of our being, causing in us profound reaction. While we don't learn anything from the experience, we feel a sense of deep understanding at least; at best, ennobling wonderment.

Dread and horror suffuse many of De la Mare's works, although a gentle humor and other qualities pervade much of his prose and poetry. "There are deeps, vasty deeps," says a recluse to his unwilling and frightened guest in an eerie old country-house, set in dusky moonlight, where "a ground mist wreathed the boles of the chestnut trees, soundlessly lapping their lowermost boughs." This story, "The Recluse," is fairly typical of many De la Mare stories in mood, setting, eccentric characters, and an imminent horror, possibly coming from within us or seen through the veil of reality. A singular accomplishment in evoking terror is De la Mare's story "In the Forest," which can be regarded as everyone's worst nightmare. Although well known for his delightful stories and verses for children, he does not spare them from the terrible in some of his works, such as "At the Keyhole" with its unforgettable refrain, "'Grill me some bones,' said the Cobbler."

De la Mare's life was outwardly uneventful, refreshingly so in our century, it has been observed. "Of few others," writes the critic D. R. McCrosson, "can it be said with equal truth that his adventures were in his imagination." And Dylan Thomas called him, aptly and humorously, "a land-

bound Conrad talking from behind a pot of ferns." He was fascinated by children and the child's imagination--in the best Wordsworthian tradition. His study of the creative imagination, Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination, is filled with speculations on the gulf between the imaginations of children and adults. Of children he writes: "We call their faith, even in ourselves, credulity; and are grown perhaps so accustomed to life's mysteries that we blanch at their candour." His stories and poems for children are ranked (by children as well as adult critics) as among the finest in the language. One of his monumental and unique anthologies is Early One Morning in the Spring: Chapters on Children and on Childhood as It is Revealed in Particular in Early Memories and Early Writings (1935)--a treasure-trove of psychological and literary information.

The light of our life, according to De la Mare, is the imagination: "Illumined by the imagination, our life--whatever its defeats and despairs--is a never-ending, unforeseen strangeness and adventure and mystery. This is the fountain of our faith and of our hope."

At the time of his death in 1956, De la Mare had become one of the most beloved and respected English authors. A special vision imbued all his work, and some of his own lines on Henry Vaughan are applicable to himself:

His flowers, waters, children, birds  
Lovely as their own archetypes are shown;  
Nothing is here uncommon, things or words,  
Yet every one's his own.

During his life, his books--novels, short stories, poetry, essays, anthologies--were published in some 150 editions. He had also written more than 60 contributions to books by other authors, as well as many contributions to periodical literature. Shown here, in commemoration of his birth a hundred years ago, is a selection of first and special editions, many autographed by the author, of his principal achievements in prose and verse. Materials on exhibit are drawn from the University Library's Walter de la Mare Collection, which came to the University as a gift from the Elmer L. and Eleanor J. Andersen Foundation.

