

CHAPTER III

The unobtrusive attempt made by Edward Thomas to evolve an adequate poetic strategy, consistent with the same values of the tradition he inherited, had gone largely unnoticed for long. And presumably, the over-all poetic situation in the early years of the century was so sickening that the shock-treatment administered by the Modernists appeared very much called for. Yet, surely, not all poets writing in English at the time were in need of shock-corrective^s. There were perhaps quite a few who could take care of themselves. Thomas Hardy, William Butler Yeats, Walter de la Mare, and D.H. Lawrence might have figured prominently among them. The solidity of the convictions of Thomas Hardy, which was more personal than Victorian, must have undermined his capacity for Romantic perceptions. In other words, we may say that the rigidity of the Hardyian character perhaps stifled the Romantic potentialities of his personality. The Romantic leanings of D.H. Lawrence were indeed pronounced. Yet, the Romantic strain in him having defied intellectual control, thus denying itself a distinctive aspect of modernity, he too, may have to be excluded from the scope of the present work.

The poetry of Walter de la Mare may deserve a special mention in the context, as the intellectual strain therein, particularly in its earlier phase, has perhaps been much too subtle. The attempts of his adult mind to get allied to the

spiritual vision of the child have indeed allowed ample scope for misapprehension. But the quality of his imagination was not so angelic as some critics believed. A closer look at it might yield hints of a firm cerebral control. Though the influence of William Blake was writ large on the early poetry of de la Mare in the importance he attached to dreams and childhood visions, the latter's affinity was more to Blake's Songs of Experience than to those of Innocence. In other words, we may observe that he was certainly closer to the fallen state of man.

While Blake found Eternity shadowed in the productions of time, de la Mare was prone to identify the shadows with the substance. In a sense he eliminated the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. The positivists were naturally sore about this tendency, as it ran counter to their own endeavour to naturalize the supernatural with the help of science. Yet, some of us cannot possibly believe that all traces of magic and mystery have been blotted out from the surface of the earth by science. For de la Mare, the world we live in is a world of infinite possibilities. In the words of W.H.Auden, his view is that "our eyes and ears do not lie to us, but do not, perhaps cannot, tell us the whole truth, and those who deny this, end up by actually narrowing their vision."¹

1. Auden, W.H. (ed.), A Choice of de la Mare's Verse (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), Introduction, p.21. Henceforth referred to as A Choice.

It is as much as to say that de la Mare takes the physical aspect seriously enough, but regards it only as part of a more inclusive reality. The sensory perception, thus, prepares the way for an extrasensory perception of deeper significance, as it does for Wordsworth. Such an attitude, however, betrays a partiality for the latter achievement, as it helps in the apprehension of the uncommon aspects of common objects.

Coleridge's effort to bring about a suspension of disbelief while recording his apprehension of the supernatural exemplified the role of the conscious mind in the process of poetry-making. The moralizing he attempted also constituted a similar effort. The concreteness and precision achieved in his word-pictures (including those of the dream-product, "Kubla Khan") resulted, again, from conscious cerebration.

De la Mare seems to have been inspired in a large measure by Coleridge's examples, though he did not share the latter's moralistic zeal. Coleridge's positing pleasure as the immediate object of a poem was, however, congenial to him. He had, as one of his poems alludes to, two deep clear eyes.² A deep and clear physical vision resulted from the efficient functioning of his conscious mind and entailed a bid to achieve a Unified Sensibility in which

2. Ibid., p.142.

Heart bids mind
 Wonder:
 Mind bids heart
 Ponder.³

Coleridge's attempts at recording his apprehensions of the supernatural suggest that he had taken it in all seriousness. The sublime moralizing function that he assigned to supernatural agencies also implies a faith in their existence probably shared by the poet and his contemporaries.

De la Mare's attitude towards supernatural presences was no less serious, though he could not be sure enough of their divinity. They did not exist to provide metaphors for his poetry, as they perhaps did for Yeats's. He did not have any moralistic ends either for them to serve. Their presence in de la Mare appears to be an end in itself. Its apprehension, however, seems to help in heightening our awareness through sensitizing and refining our sensibility. May be, de la Mare's use of the Romantic evil and terror has left much to be desired, as pointed by David Perkins.⁴ But we would do well to remember that de la Mare was looking at the supernatural from a child's angle. The great Romantics who made better use of it were living in a different environment. The modern man's extreme self-consciousness, scientific obsessions, and sceptical bent of mind have made it nearly impossible for him to give himself up to a belief in supernatural presences. And, except for his

3. Ibid., p.142.

4. HMP., pp.182-183.

earnest bid to gain the visionary intensity of childhood, de la Mare himself might have failed to give credence to them.

W.H. Auden has pointed out how the gentleness of the English landscape can sometimes tempt those who love it into "Writing genteely". According to him, de la Mare was protected from the temptation by a "conviction that what our senses perceive of the world about us is not all there is to know" and, by a "sense of the powers of evil."⁵ As a possible third factor, we may mention his acute self-consciousness which apparently evoked in him a sense of isolation and otherness when he found himself among the presences of nature.

The rabbit in his burrow keeps
 No guarded watch, in peace he sleeps;
 The wolf that howls in challenging night
 Cowers to her lair at morning light;
 The simplest bird entwines a nest
 Where she may lean her lovely breast,
 Couched in the silence of the bough:-
 But hou, O man, what rest hast thou? 6

And elsewhere he says:

... every thorn,
 And weed, and flower,
 And every time-worn stone
 A challenge cries on the trespasser:
Beware!
Thou art alone! 7

De la Mare's world has been called 'a world of one', as there are no relationships in it.⁸ The modern man's sense of

5. A Choice., p.21.

6. Ibid., p.153.

7. Ibid., p.102.

8. Cox, G.B., Dyson, A.E., Modern Poetry : Studies in Practical Criticism, (London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1963), p.42. Henceforth referred to as Cox & Dyson.

alienation from nature and lack of other abiding attachments might account for the tendency. Possibly, the absence of didactic intentions or moralistic preoccupations on the part of de la Mare also influenced it to some extent.

An overwhelming sense of isolation promoted by a tormenting self-consciousness has often found eloquent expression in de la Mare:

Oh, why make such ado -
 This fretful care and trouble?
 The sun in noonday's blue
 Pours radiance on earth's bubble
 What though the heart-strings crack,
 And sorrow bid thee languish,
 Dew falls; the night comes back;
 Sleep, and forget thine anguish.
 Oh, why in shadow haunt?
 Shines not the evening flower?
 Hark, how the sweet birds chaunt,
 The lovely light their bower.
 Water her music makes,
 Lulling even these to slumber;
 And only dead of darkness wakes
 Stars without number.⁹

De la Mare evidently believed that children were refreshingly free from self-consciousness, and were thus capable of maintaining a wholesome link with both natural and supernatural presences. His desire to look at the world from a child's angle represents a typically Romantic yearning to organize innocence. He also believed that children shared that awareness with lesser animals and supernatural presences.

9. de la Mare, Walter, Collected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1942, Eleventh Impression, September 1954), p.134. Henceforth referred to as WDOP.

Though Wordsworth also credited children with an identical capability, he would not perhaps have approved of the idea of treating man as inferior to nearly all sub-human creatures. Having sought to partake of the visionary intensity of childhood as a possible antidote to his disquieting self-consciousness, de la Mare would seem to have succeeded in his bid to a remarkable extent. If an achievement of this order failed to inspire in him a Wordsworthian faith in himself and human potentialities, his self-conscious mind, again, is largely to blame. The ease and grace with which his perceptions found expression have been undoubtedly admirable. Coleridge's attempts in this regard look rather laboured, in comparison.

The skill with which de la Mare has managed to evoke an awareness of supernatural presences in his celebrated poem, "The Listeners" has won universal acclaim. The imagery of the poem reveals a rare keenness and precision. Of course, it is all meant only as a means to promote an awareness of the supernatural. To convince us of the quality of light by means of a description of darkness is indeed no mean achievement.

The concreteness and precision achieved in the process does not, however, spring from a desire on the part of de la Mare to be faithful to natural phenomena. His descriptions

in most cases had other ends to serve. In "The Phantom", for example, he says:

Wilt thou never come again,
 Besuteous one?
 Yet the woods are green and dim,
 Yet the birds' deluding cry
 Echoes in the hollow sky,
 Yet the falling waters brim
 The clear pool which thou wast fain
 To paint thy lovely cheek upon,
 Besuteous one! 10

The woods, birds, echoes and waters appearing here would hardly have mattered to him, unless they helped in lending credibility to the Besuteous one. His Keatsian flair for painting sensuous word-pictures out of the most-unpromising material is revealed by the portraits of Idleness¹¹ and Miss Apathy.¹²

Assuming the intensity of a child in spiritual perceptions is obviously an achievement of the faculty of imagination. The adult intellect of the poet must have remained in tact in the process to play its own part in recording such perceptions.

De la Mare's dream-imagery also abounds in concrete particulars. A comparison between de la Mare's "I Dream of a Place" and W.B.Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree" may be interesting.

10. Ibid., p.277.

11. A Choice., pp.60-61.

12. Ibid., pp.62-73.

"THE LAKE ISLE OF INNISFREE"

I WILL arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
 And a small sabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
 Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the
 honey-bee,
 And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes
 dropping slow,
 Dropping from the veils of the morning to where
 the cricket sings,
 There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
 And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
 I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
 While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
 I hear it in the deep heart's core.¹³

"I DREAM OF A PLACE"

I dream of a place where I long to live always:
 Green hills, shallow sand dunes, and nearing the sea;
 The house is of stone; there are twelve lattice windows,
 And a door, with a keyhole though lost is the key.
 Thick-thatched is the roof; it has low, white-washed
 chimneys
 Where doves preen their wings, and soo, Please, love:
 love me!

There martins are flitting: the sun shines; the moon shines;
 Drifts of bright flowers are adrone with the bee;

And a wonderful music of bird-song at daybreak
 Wells up from the bosom of every tree.

A brook of clear water encircles the garden,
 With kingcups, and cress, and the white fleur de lys—

Moorhens and dabchicks; the wild duck at evening
 Wing away to the sun, in the shape of a V;

And the night shows the stars, shining in at the windows,
 Brings nearer the far-away sigh of the sea.

Oh, the quiet, the green of the grass, the grey willows,
 The light, and the shine, and the air sweet and free! —

That dream of a place where I long to live always:
 Low hills, shallow sand dunes — at peace there to be! ¹⁴

13. Jeffares, A. Norman, W.B. Yeats : Selected Poetry (Pan Books in association with Macmillan, London, Reprint 1976), p.16.

14. A Choice., pp.30-31.

Each of these poems presents for the poet a land of his heart's desire. But, ironically enough, the 'dream-land' of the latter poem looks more concrete and true than the Lake Isle. We find more of clichés in Yeats's poem. Though it is more picturesque than most other poems of Yeats, the honey-bee, cricket and linnet seem to form a conventional Romantic landscape. And, in spite of the nine bean-rows, the picture looks rather vague, sentimental and undistinguished, unless we tend to read esoteric significances into it. We must, however, concede that the poem has its own appeal.

De la Mare's poem, on the contrary, is replete with sensuous details. Its imagistic precision speaks of the influence of an alert intellect. Of course, we are aware that Yeats's strength lay elsewhere.

In its intensity, the 'dream-experience' of de la Mare seems akin to the experience of an inspired moment, when the unconscious level of the mind becomes active. The product of such a dream may be hardly distinct from that of imagination. We wonder whether 'dream' is a word chosen by the poet to name his experience of imaginative intensity. The presence of a lively consciousness to record the experiences of such exalted dream-like states without losing sight of actualities perhaps renders his 'dream-images' as concrete as any other.

Presumably, de la Mare's endeavour to develop in himself the spiritual vision of a child and his belief in the special awareness shared by children and lesser animals rendered his attitude towards sub-human creatures unusually warm. Yet, his portraits of them, while revealing an imaginative intensity, are too concrete to be sentimental.

"Jenny Wren" may serve as an example:

Of all the birds that rove and sing,
Near dwellings made for men,
None is so nimble, feat, and trim
As Jenny Wren.
With pin-point bill, and tail a-cock,
So wildly shrill she cries,
The echoes on their roof-tree knock
And fill the skies.
Never was sweeter seraph hid
Within so small a house-
A tiny, inch-long, eager, ardent,
feathered mouse. 15

His poignant awareness of the callous attitude of adult humans towards lesser animals is admirably embodied in

"Reserved":

... 'I was thinking, Mother, of that poor old horse
They killed the other day;
Nannie says it was only a bag of bones,
But I hated it taken away.'
'Of course, sweet; but now the baker's man
Will soon have a nice new motor van.'
'Yes, Mother. But when on our walk a squirrel
Crept up to my thumb to be fed,
She shoe'd it away with her gloves-like this!
They ought to be shot, she said.'
'She may have been reading, darling, that
Squirrels are only a kind of rat.'

15. Ibid., p.38.

'Goldfinches, Mother, owls and mice,
Tom-tits and bunnies and jays-
Everything in my picture-books
Will soon be gone, she says.'

'You see, my precious, so many creatures,
Though exquisitely made,
Steal, or are dirty and dangerous,
Or else they are bad for Trade.' 16

The poem also suggests de la Mare's aversion for scientific education and the achievements of science, though it was not perhaps as overwhelming as that of D.H.Lawrence.

The progress of de la Mare's poetry was apparently from the impersonal to the personal, though his earlier poetry was not wholly devoid of the personal element. Having played "Hide and Seek" for quite some time -

Hide and Seek, says the Wind,
In the shade of the woods;
Hide and seek, says the Moon,
To the hazel buds;
Hide and Seek, says the Cloud,
Star on to star;
Hide and Seek, says the Wave
At the harbour bar;
Hide and Seek, say I,
To myself, and step
Out of the dream of Wake
Into the dream of Sleep. 17

- he seems to have grown weary of the game. "The Veil" expresses his impatience with disguises:

16. WDCP., p.50.

17. de la Mare, Walter, Collected Rhymes and Verses (London: Faber and Faber, 1944, Reprint 1975), p.250.

... beneath that veil
 A happy mouth no doubt can make
 English sound sweeter for its sake.
 But then, why muffle in, like this,
 What every blossomy wind would kiss?
 Why in that little night disguise
 A daylight face, those starry eyes? 18

The questions obviously are directed at the poet's Muse. The poem also appears to testify to the presence of the personal element in the "escapist" poetry of his early years:

The tip of a small nose I see,
 And two red lips, set curiously
 Like twin-born cherries on one stem,
 And yet she has netted even them.¹⁹

It was indeed quite some time before the veil wholly disappeared. The poetry, then, gained a new look, as the elvish aspects of the earlier work gave way to a new robustness. And, it often had a stunning impact:

What, do you suppose, we're in this world for,
 sweet heart?
 What in this haunted, crazy, beautiful cage -
 Keeps so many, like ourselves, poor pining human
 creatures,
 As if from some assured, yet withholden heritage?
 Keeps us lamenting beneath all our happy laughter,
 Silence, dreams, hope for what may not come after,
 While life wastes and withers, as it has for all mortals,
 Age on to age, on to age? 20

This new poetry brought de la Mare closer to the Modernists. No doubt, even earlier his understanding of the adult-world had been hardly different from theirs. But his approach then

18. WDP., p.120.

19. Ibid., p.119.

20. A Choice., p.141.

had appeared rather feminine, owing largely to a lack of proper appreciation of the latent intellectuality of his work. His sense of isolation and alienation and want of belief in himself and human potentialities were symptomatic of an abiding self-consciousness characteristically modern.²¹ The laughter-sense much valued by the Modernists was also well within his range. S.C.Duffin had^s elaborated on it.²² It was perhaps de la Mare's self-consciousness that gave him the detachment needed to poke fun at his own self as "The Dunce" exemplifies:

Why does he still keep ticking?
 Why does his round white face
 Stare at me over the books and ink,
 And mock at my disgrace?
 Why does that thrush call, 'Dunce, dunce, dunce!?'
 Why does that bluebottle buzz?
 Why does the sun so silent shine? -
 And what do I care if it does? 23

It is an ability which the earlier Romantics (except perhaps, Keats) badly lacked. Wordsworth, for instance, was inclined to be too sure of himself and the divinity manifested through the presences of nature to entertain such impressions.

In its later phase De la Mare's poetry turned into a vehicle of thought rather than pleasure to suit the taste of the moderns and revelled in stark realism and melancholy.

21. See HMP., p.185. David Perkins has drawn attention to the Modernity of de la Mare's self-consciousness.

22. Duffin, Henry Charles, Walter de la Mare : A Study of His Poetry (London: Sidwick and Jackson Limited, 1949), pp.143-161.

23. A Choice., p.60.

A note of melancholy was, in fact, characteristic of de la Mare's poetry, though it became explicit only in his later phase. While commenting on it, Edward Thomas remarked that such a tendency could not surprise any one who realized how few of any man's hours could after all be given to reverie and how difficult and unlovely must appear the broken, scattered, and jangled things outside that province.²⁴

Thomas's use of the word 'reverie' in the context does not seem altogether happy, particularly when we remember the affinity between de la Mare's dream-experiences and imaginative perceptions. The choice of the word perhaps suggests Thomas's partiality for the earth, his own susceptibility to the skyward urge notwithstanding. In any case, the notion that de la Mare's melancholic tendency was the offshoot of his reveries may not be sustainable. It was perhaps the other way round.

Edward Thomas, however, described de la Mare's poetry as "the most feather-weight original poetry of our time" and found the best of Coleridge and Poe in it.²⁵ The compliment seems handsome enough. Perhaps, it also makes amends for his use of the word 'reverie' earlier. De la Mare's contribution towards advancing the Coleridgean strain of Romanticism by way of promoting an awareness of the unknown modes

24. ALNB., p.102.

25. Ibid., p.102.

of being has no doubt been significant. The perception of the supernatural recorded in his poetry seems to have a ring of authenticity about it, though skilful design perhaps accounts for a part of that achievement.

If the early work of de la Mare contained too much of poetry as observed by Edward Thomas,²⁶ the later work perhaps revealed too little of it. His Winged Chariot,²⁷ for instance, tended to be earth-bound, thanks largely to its immense thought-content. It is not, however, to belittle either the significance of the accompanying emotions or the excellence of the native brand of symbolism which got perfected through his deft and delicate handling.

It is perhaps to the credit of Walter de la Mare as a man, that the shattering experiences which cast a dismal shadow on his poetry, did not wholly shake his faith in a spirit that guided him, though the massive Hopkinsian faith echoed earlier in "The Scribe"²⁸ eluded him:

Age shall not daunt me, nor sorrow for youth that is gone
 If thou lead on before me;
 If thy voice in the darkness and bleak of that final night
 Still its enchantment weaves o'er me.
 Thou hauntest the stealing shadow of rock and tree;
 Hovering on wings invisible smilest at me;
 Fannest the secret scent of the moth-hung flower;
 Making of musky eve thy slumber-bower.²⁹

26. Ibid., p.102.

27. A Choice, pp.163-217.

28. WDCP., p.173.

29. Ibid., p.311.

That strange spirit, to be sure, had an aspect of divinity about it. It must naturally have helped the poet to keep his own spirits afloat, while he was caught in the flood of disgusting and debilitating emotions evidenced in his poetry.